

N. DUBOV

The Fugitive





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Translated from the Russian by OLGA SHARTSE
Illustrated by N. RODIONOV

Н. Дубов

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Early in the morning Senka-Angel brought the water. He wasn't a tractor driver really; his job at the collective farm was to drive a lorry, a milk truck or any other vehicle that wanted driving, but the tractor driver was ill, and that's why Senka, who could handle any machine, was put on the job. The farm had its poultry-yard on the bank of the estuary—the ducks couldn't have it better, but there was no fresh water, and so every morning the tractor hauled the pot-bellied yellow water tank there. It dropped in at their yard on the way, and everybody came for water, filling pots, large jars and pails. There was a well behind the kitchen garden, halfway to the sea, but the water was a bit salty there. It wasn't so bad once you got used to it. But why drink salt water when you could drink sweet?

Maximovna, Ma and Nyushka would hold their pails and pans under the jet of water, Grandpa—who wasn't actually anyone's grandfather, but was just called that—and Fyodor would take them away, while Senka-Angel trained his ribbed canvas hose at whatever wanted filling next, yelling at everyone and cracking jokes. It was always great fun with everyone bustling and shouting, and all the noisier for the tractor rattling with never a stop. Senka-Angel never switched off the engine because there was no storage battery. The tractor did have a storage battery once, and a brand new one too, but the former collective farm chairman and storekeeper went and sold it for booze. They tried to pin the crime on Senka-Angel, accusing *him* of selling it for booze, but their story wouldn't wash because Senka was a teetotaler; he didn't even drink sour wine or beer. They didn't prove anything, but the tractor was left without a storage battery, and now Senka had to get it going from a truck every morning and go chugging all day until he was through with the work.

Yurka and Slavka fetched the empty pails and things as usual, while Pa—he was a sick man and was not allowed to carry anything heavy—stood a distance away, telling them what to do. All of them were so busy that they didn't notice the blue Volga stopping at the gate. A tall, skinny man got out of the car, walked into the yard and said good-morning, but no one heard him what with the yelling and the rumbling of the tractor. Yurka was the first to see the man and, forgetting the ten-litre bottle he was lugging, stood gaping at him. The man wore blue overalls, but they were not plain, crumpled and grimy like Senka-Angel's, they were clean and covered all over with zips and shiny studs. Pa saw him too, went up and greeted him, inclining his head slightly, raising his right hand to touch the peak of his cap and then holding it out to the newcomer. (Pa did it beautifully. Yurka had practised it time and again before the mirror, but never got it quite as smart.) Talking was hopeless because at that very moment Senka-Angel flung his hose on top of the tank, climbed onto the driver's seat and shouting: "So long! So long!" clutched in. The tractor roared, and rumbled out of the yard, hauling the pot-bellied water tank away.

The newcomer said "Good-morning" once again, and one after the other everybody said "Good-morning" to him too. They were all staring their eyes out at him now and wondering what he was and what he wanted here.

"Who is the boss here?" asked the newcomer.

"That depends on what kind of boss you mean," replied Yurka's Pa. He had lived in town, he'd been around and could talk to anyone.

"There's a sign on the house saying: 'Road-Building Foreman', and so the foreman must be the boss."

"The foreman that's me," said Grandpa, his wrinkled face wrinkling up even more and his faded little eyes narrowing into mere slits as they always did when he expected trouble.

"I've been all over Tarkhankut, but I haven't seen a better spot than yours," said the newcomer. "It's like an oasis in a desert."

Grandpa did not understand, and wrinkled up even more.

"What's so wonderful here? A spot like any other...."

"One never appreciates what one possesses," the newcomer said obscurely. Afterwards, too, he often said things that no one could understand. "But we like it very much here. Would you let us stay with you for a while?"

Grandpa's face relaxed a little. Clearly, the newcomer was not anyone in charge and his arrival did not spell trouble.

"With us? Where? We're sort of packed—four rooms, three families,

and the workshop in the fourth. Oh well, if you're so set on it, we'll make room for you somehow."

"You got me wrong, I'm afraid. We've no intention of putting you out. If you don't mind, we'll set up a tent over there and live in it," the newcomer pointed to the knoll overgrown with tamarisk.

Grandpa's face cleared up.

"You're welcome to it, you won't wear the ground out."

The door of the Volga banged, everyone turned to look and so did the newcomer, who smiled and said: "Curiosity killed the cat...."

A young woman walked into the yard. A woman like any other, nothing special. The wind tousled her hair, she brushed it back with a hand and glanced worriedly at her companion, but when she saw that he was smiling she smiled too. And everyone began to smile simply because it was pleasant just to look at her—at the deep dimples in her cheeks, at her blue wide-open eyes, and at the way she walked, hardly touching the ground.

"Here we are," said the newcomer. "This is Yulia Ivanovna, and my name is Vitaly Sergeyevich Voronin."

"Glad to know you," Grandpa said. "I'm Timofei Arkhipovich Kostirya. And this is Maximovna, my missis."

Maximovna wiped her right hand on her skirt, and Yulia Ivanovna's small white hand disappeared in her red beefy paw as in a thick-knitted mitten. The others in the yard filed up and shook hands, all but the kids, of course, because who'd want to shake hands with them anyway?

"It's all settled, darling," Vitaly Sergeyevich said. "Let's go and see the lie of the land, shall we?"

Grandpa went with the newcomers to choose the spot, and the three boys—Yurka, Slavka and Mitka—naturally tagged behind.

Just outside the fence was a pile of rusty metal scrap and a lime pit. Every year shortly before May Day the pit was opened and the house and the fence round the yard were whitewashed. The wild oats, which had withered already, rustled underfoot. The tamarisk shrubs were in flower, and it seemed as if pale-pink smoke was rising from the knoll. The newcomers glanced at each other and smiled again.

"Well?" said Vitaly Sergeyevich. "Wasn't I right? The sea is just below, miles of private beach, these pink shrubs, no crowds, and all these open spaces...."

"It's a dream!" said Yulia Ivanovna. "It's the loveliest spot imaginable!"

She followed his pointing hand with her eyes. Yurka did too, but for the life of him he couldn't see what was there to gush about. He just lived here the year round and never stopped to think if the spot was pretty or not. No one thought or talked about it. Neither Fyodor and Nyushka, nor Pa and

Ma. If anything, they all grumbled about living so far from anywhere — no people here, no shops, no club. And no electricity either, and the children had such a long trek to school, in all weathers. And in case of emergency, someone would have to run the four kilometres to Lomovka, as that was the nearest village. It was five kilometres to Grokhovka where the collective farm management was, with a phone and everything, and all of six to the ferry.

Grandpa and Maximovna did not complain, but that was because, Pa said, they owned a house with a garden in Lomovka where Grandpa's eldest son lived with his family, and here Grandpa had his room, he kept a cow, pigs and all kinds of poultry, and had the horse which came with the job. Grandpa was his own master here; he grew all the barley he wanted for the horse and also his own animals, and raised more vegetables than anyone could eat. True enough he also gave plots to the others, but how much stuff could they grow working on the road all day with only the evenings and their days-off to call their own?

To Yurka's mind, it wasn't at all bad here. Sure, it would be more fun if other kids also lived here, because there were just the three of them — himself, Slavka and Mitka. And Lenka. But Mitka was only a baby, and Lenka — being a girl — didn't count. Never mind, he and Slavka had fun enough together. What was so good about Lomovka, he'd like to know? The sea there was two kilometres or so to go, too far in this heat, so Lomovka boys rarely went swimming, if they went at all. And here the sea was a stone's throw away, and you could go and have a dip every five minutes if you wanted. They did, too. All the time. All through the summer. And you could fish in the estuary or else in the sea, and catch crabs too. And out in the steppe you could hunt tarantulas, flood gophers out of their holes, or look for birds' nests.... And the exciting things the sea washed ashore? Not so very often, it is true, but still.... No, Yurka wouldn't want to live in Lomovka for all that there was a club there and pictures were sometimes shown. A film mobile it was called, and it did not come very often, and as for the dances — they might never be held, for all he cared. Autumn and winter you had to wade through the mud there, and by the time you got to school you'd be dirty all over. And in summer you choked with the dust, the sandstone houses got heated like ovens, and the water collecting in the ditch from the well at the end of the street stank to high heaven. Water dripped all the time from the iron tank there, and since it had nowhere to go it just stayed in the ditch that twisted alongside the street and went bad. For another thing, Lomovka was set too far back from the highroad, nobody new ever came, and there'd be always the same people — today, tomorrow, or a year from now. *Their* house stood just off

the road. Gosh, the number of cars that flew past in a day! All kinds of different cars. They used to run day and night, but after the sand bar on Donguzlav had been ploughed up and a ferry started running, the cars stopped coming at night because the ferry only worked in the daytime. It was all for the best: you couldn't see the cars in the dark anyway and only got dazzled by their headlights.

Sure it was a long trek to school. In summer you could ride a bike, but in autumn and winter you wouldn't get far on your bike through the mud. But if Senka-Angel happened to be going past in a lorry or a milk truck he'd stop by and keep his finger on his horn button until he and Slavka came running from the house, and he'd give them a lift.

"C'mon, soldiers, quick run!" he'd call out to them. "Don't upset my time-table, get in!"

He would take them all the way to Lomovka. He had no time-table, of course, it was just the way he talked. He said the funniest things, Senka did. They weren't soldiers, Slavka once said to him, so why did he call them that?

"You're not now, but you will be," Senka replied. "We're, all of us, soldiers.... Come on, get in, you're holding me up."

If Senka wasn't going their way they had to foot it. Other drivers never gave them a lift, they did not even stop, and just raced past.

They were luckiest when there was a big snowfall and the road was buried under. For one thing, they didn't have to go to school, and for another—all the drivers and people whose cars got stuck in the snow would crowd into their house. Senka-Angel, driving a caterpillar tractor, and Fyodor, working the scraper attached to it, would get busy ploughing through the snowdrifts and trying to clear the road, while inside the house it would be noisy and exciting with the drivers eating, drinking and talking all the time. There were no spare beds and no place to put them anyway, and so everyone slept on the floor. Grandpa didn't like to part with his precious straw, and though he grouched he brought armfuls to lay on the floor, because people couldn't sleep on the bare boards, after all, could they? Gosh, what a lot of different people you saw then, what a lot of thrilling stories and adventures you heard from them! The kids were naturally chased off to bed and lie down they did and soon went to sleep. Not Yurka, though. He only pretended to be sleeping and actually listened to the talk. Sometimes he did not fall asleep until daybreak, not until after the drivers left to push their cars on to the cleared road, and their gruff shouts of "One, two, push!" and cursing were heard outside.

It was really good to live right off the road. They were right, those newcomers were—their house did stand in a good spot. Come to think of

it, it really was beautiful here. Lots of space. A cold wind did blow from the north in winter, but the house had its blank wall turned to the road, so they didn't worry. The barley rippled and bowed to the wind on the other side of the road, and up the slope stretched a stony steppe on which nothing was grown and only sheep were grazed. The steppe rose higher and higher to the very horizon, and there, on the edge, you could make out several cage-like towers, standing far apart and seeming to march away, single file, into the blue haze.... Pa said they were derricks, that people were drilling holes in the ground and looking for oil. Oil had already been found. Sometimes dense clouds of black smoke shot up into the sky, and a smoky fire blazed underneath. At night, it looked like a terrible disaster, a huge house on fire, a frightening sight to see, but actually it wasn't a disaster, it was just oil being burnt. What for, no one knew. Yurka had long wanted to go there and look, but he never went: it was too far away, maybe he couldn't make it there and back in a day. The road, white from lime, dipped down a little from their house and then ran on to the narrow spit of the sand bar between Lake Donuzlav and the sea. The salt lake came up to the road in a shallow pool, overgrown with reeds and sedge. The white poultry house showed through the faded tassels of the reeds, and beyond the cottage the spit and the road looked grey, and then a sort of lilac, while very, very far away you could see the bluish shapes of the cranes working at the ferry which was invisible from here. And right at their doorstep was the sea! You just had to go out of the gate and up the knoll, and there it was. And that knoll alone was something!

Grandpa told them there were trenches dug around it during the war and there had been fighting here, too. Yurka, Slavka and Grandpa's grandson Sashka when he came down from Lomovka often played at war on this knoll. The shrubs made a good cover for scouting and ambush....

"Why were the shrubs chopped down?" Vitaly Sergeyevich asked, pointing to the hacked-up limbs protruding from the ground.

"It was Ma," Yurka replied. "We had a cold winter...."

"What barbarity!" said Vitaly Sergeyevich. "There's little enough growth in the Crimean steppes, in Tarkhankut especially, so you should cherish every blade of grass and not chop down shrubs!"

"What can you do with such people?" said Grandpa.

And Yurka thought it was all very well for Grandpa to say that, seeing that half of his shed was still stuffed with coal, while theirs was empty, and if they had no money to buy coal come winter Ma would have to chop down the tamarisk shrubs again.

"Well, this is where we'll set up our tent. What do you say, darling?"

Vitaly Sergeyevich said. "A beautiful spot, but there's not much shade, I'm afraid."

The tamarisk shrubs did provide some shade, but it was so thin, it didn't count.

"One can't roast in the sun all day long. Yulia Ivanovna loves it, she takes to the sun like a duck to water, but I can't. An awning would be fine, we have the canvas but no stakes. Perhaps you have some?"

Grandpa had everything, he was a thrifty soul. He found the stakes, the pegs and even the hammer to drive them in with. Yurka climbed up into the garret of Grandpa's summer kitchen and threw down the stakes from there, after which he and Slavka carried them up the knoll, while Mitka came with the pegs. Grandpa dug the holes, drove in the stakes, and Vitaly Sergeyevich set up the tent. It was orange, and so bright that it was as if another sun had burst into fire among the tamarisk shrubs. Vitaly Sergeyevich took a large suitcase down from the roof of his car, but it turned out to be a folding table and several folding chairs with shiny pipes for legs. Yulia Ivanovna then placed some kind of machine on the table and, noticing the boys' puzzled faces, laughed and told them it was a gas stove. You couldn't tear your eyes away from it, it was so fascinating. On one side of it there was a small cylinder, bright red like a fire extinguisher, with a silver hose snaking from it, while the stove itself was grey, with frost-like tracings on it, and from the burner spurted a softly hissing green flame. Next, Yulia Ivanovna brought out two blue bags. She started blowing one of them up like a balloon, and it turned out to be a mattress and not an ordinary bag at all.

Yurka and Slavka were dying to examine and finger everything, but they knew they must not touch.

Pa came, looked at the table, the chairs and the gas stove, called the stove a very cultured thing, and then told Grandpa that he was stretching the awning wrong, it shouldn't have an incline to the south.

"I want it like that," said Vitaly Sergeyevich. "To keep out the sun."

"If the northeaster starts it will rip the thing off in two ticks."

"Really?" Vitaly Sergeyevich said worriedly. "Does it come often?"

"Not in summer, just once in a while," Grandpa replied. "Autumn and winter, that's different...."

Pa smiled, but let the matter go. He was a fisherman and knew better.

"Won't you find it dull here?" he asked. "We live such an uncultured life in this backwoods."

Vitaly Sergeyevich smiled.

"Culture is something a person has in him, it makes no difference where he lives."

"I beg to disagree with you there!" said Pa. "Can you compare this place to Yalta, say, or even our Yevpatoria? There you have shops and restaurants, and quite a different crowd too. Just taking a stroll down the street is sheer pleasure."

"That's not for us. We wanted to get away from the crowds. It's a splendid spot you have here—the sea, plenty of air, and quiet!"

But Pa would not be put off that easily.

"You said it! It's as quiet here as in a churchyard. We've no radio even, let alone a cinema."

"I have a radio receiver in my car, and as for the cinema, I rarely go, I don't care for it," said Vitaly Sergeyevich.

Yurka popped his eyes out at him and decided that he was pulling their leg. How could anyone not care for the cinema? Yurka himself only went to the cinema when he was visiting Granny in Yevpatoria, and he remembered all the films from beginning to end. All except one, but that was a goofy film about love. The man and the woman looked at each other stupidly all the time, sang some sick-making stuff, and kissed. Who cared?

"Then, I expect, you have a television set," Pa persisted.

"I have. For my mother-in-law. She sits staring into that box from morning till night."

"Naturally, living as you do in Moscow this place is all right for a change, but if you had to live here permanently like us...."

Pa gave a sly smile preparing to say something clever, but there was no one to listen. Yulia Ivanovna had called Vitaly Sergeyevich to help her open a suitcase. Pa stood there smiling a bit longer, then turned and went home.

Grandpa finished tying down the awning, it filled out and flapped in the wind like a sail.

"Thank you very much, Timofei Arkhipovich, I don't know how I could have managed without you....And now please call your wife. We'll have a small housewarming and drink to our friendship."

He set out a bottle with some brown liquid in it, like tea. Yurka guessed that it was time for them to go. They were not making themselves useful any more, and simply squatted on the ground and stared. He was reluctant to go away though because Yulia Ivanovna had just unzipped a fat yellow bag and was getting some wonderful things out: small plates, all different colours, plastic drinking cups that fitted into one another, one smaller than the last, and several brown holsters, only what they had inside were not pistols but folding knives and even spoons, and after that came a lot of different tins, big and small ones....

"Let's go," Yurka told Slavka, and stood up.

“Stop!” Vitaly Sergeyevich said. “Yulia, we can’t let our helpers go like this, can we?”

Yulia Ivanovna delved in the bag and brought out some sweets in pretty wrappers. She gave them two each.

“We don’t want any ... don’t bother ... we just...” Yurka mumbled, but took the sweets all the same.

He and Slavka went behind a shrub and took a good look at the picture on the wrappers. They recognised Spasskaya Tower with the star on top right away. Mitka unwrapped his sweet without looking long at the picture, popped it into his mouth, and ran back to Yulia Ivanovna.

“Have you any more like these?” he asked.

“You liked them?” she smiled. “Want more?”

“Uhuh! Never mind if it’s without the sweet. Don’t throw away the golden wrappers, auntie. I want them....”

“All right. Only they’re not gold, they’re foil.”

“Same thing,” Mitka tossed his head. “I want them.”

“If you want them so badly you’ll get them all,” Yulia Ivanovna said.

“And me?” Slavka asked.

He had also run back to Yulia Ivanovna. Yurka wanted to do the same, but he heard Vitaly Sergeyevich say:

“Is that fair? You collect matchboxes, don’t you? That’s how it will be: you get the matchboxes, and he gets the wrappers.”

The boys walked away from the tent, but leaving the knoll altogether was simply more than they could do. They hung about the place, pretending to be playing or looking for something, and all the time trying to keep an eye on whatever was happening, without being seen.

Grandpa and Maximovna stayed talking with the newcomers till late. Rather, Maximovna alone did all the talking. She liked to talk, and here were these new people who were too polite to interrupt and, what’s more, actually encouraged her. And so she chanted on and on, telling them how in 1930, when they were both young and collectivisation began, she and her man left their native Tambov village and landed in the Crimea, what a hard time they had, and how finally her man got a job in road repairs and became a self-taught master of the trade, and then, when the war broke out, how he was drafted and how his entire division fell into the Germans’ hands at Jankoi, and how she set off to get him out, and just then our sailors landed in Yevpatoria, guns were fired from the shore and from the sea and bombs were dropped from planes, and how all our poor sailor boys were killed, and she all but died from fright but still pushed on until she found the POW camp, and how she left no stone unturned to get him released and released he was—a bag of bones covered all over with lice,



and how she brought him home, all but carrying him, and how they went through the hardships of war together, and then our army came, her man went back to work, was made a road foreman again and life became a little easier, and now it was really good the Lord be thanked, and how she liked peace and quiet in her home because she was that kind of person.... Yurka had heard the story hundreds of times and knew it by heart.

Grandpa became quickly fuddled as usual, and sat wrinkling up his face, running his tongue over his parched lips, and grinning.

"That's right. You said it," he put in now and then.

And then Maximovna took him home to sleep and, in a low voice, so that the newcomers shouldn't hear, called him all kind of names for getting soused like a pig and cursed him beforehand for the hangover he'd wake up



with, moaning and groaning the whole of tomorrow, and in reply Grandpa merely smiled blissfully and mumbled: "That's right. You said it."

In the morning he came out of his room looking pretty glum. He did not go out to work and said: "Let Daughter have a rest."

Daughter was the name of the mare. Grandpa was very fond of her, he did not like to put her in harness, and did not trust her with anyone.

"Daughter, my foot. It's you who wants a rest, not that dumb animal!" Maximovna fumed. "Your stupid head is splitting, I shouldn't wonder."

"And how!" Grandpa agreed meekly.

"There! And now you want me to nurse you.... Look at Vitaly Sergeyevich, that's what I call a husband, and you...."

"What's wrong with me?"

"What isn't, you'd better ask! I wasted my whole life on you and what good did I ever see from you?"

"That's right," Grandpa said, and suddenly wailed: "Why, Maximovna, what are you saying? Did I ever do you wrong or lay a fist on you?"

"Huh! I'd like to see you try! I'd give you such a walloping...."

Yurka pictured this small, puny old man trying to beat up his hefty and still strong Maximovna, and giggled into his fist.

"I'm not talking about fists, I'm talking about loving. Did you see how he dances round his wife?"

"Bless you, Maximovna, am I to start courting you again in my old age?"

"What's old age got to do with it? Take that man, his hair's grey, but look how he tries to please her all the time. Darling this and darling that.... Small wonder she's so plump and well cared for. And you, you care for your mare more...."

"But she's a dumb animal, she can't tell me what she wants!"

"So you'd like me to be dumb too?"

Here Maximovna flew off the handle altogether and started enumerating all the wrongs Grandpa had ever done her. He only squirmed.

It struck Yurka that the way the newcomers behaved and talked to each other was not at all the way of Grandpa and Maximovna, Fyodor and Nyushka, or Pa and Ma. True, Grandpa and Maximovna never had a rough-and-tumble fight, but Maximovna was forever nagging and scolding Grandpa. He took it meekly. He was a kind old man, and never scolded anyone. Fyodor and Nyushka hadn't been married long, just over a year, and he only beat her up once, when he was terribly drunk. Pa and Ma squabbled all the time. Especially when they got drunk. Pa then yelled at Ma that she had bound him hand and foot, and it was all on account of her that he was wasted here, and he called her the ugliest names too, and Ma also called him names for ruining her life and making her miss all the chances she had of marrying someone else and living like a human being, and then Pa beat her up. They'd make up afterwards or maybe they would not make up and just start talking as if nothing had happened, and before you knew it they'd be quarrelling again. For as long as Yurka could remember it had always been like that. And none of the couples he knew ever spoke to each other so lovingly, never looked or smiled at each other like that — smiling simply because they liked to look at each other....

The newcomers were the talk of the yard all morning. Maximovna gushed over the food and drink they'd been treated to, over the way the newcomers had with them, over the pretty dress of the wife and the nice, trim figure she had. Ma plied Maximovna with questions, and sighed: "Lucky woman!", and Nyushka kept silent — she always did. Pa said that

Vitaly Sergeyevich was a cultured man, you could tell at a glance, and Yulia Ivanovna was a very attractive woman. But here, for some reason, Ma got angry and said that Yulia Ivanovna was nothing to write home about. Senka-Angel, who'd only had a glimpse of Vitaly Sergeyevich, sized him up at once: "He's an authority."

Sashka came from Lomovka on his bike. He was a nasty, cowardly brat. He'd do something rotten and put the blame on others. A lickspittle, too. He'd cuddle up to his Grandpa and Grandma, and say things about them behind their backs. Yurka disliked Sashka, but still he took him up the knoll because he himself wanted to get another look at the tent. He meant to show it to Sashka from a distance. Sashka wanted to come closer, but Yurka didn't let him and swore he'd hit him one if he went. Sashka was quite likely to do something nasty and pin the blame on Yurka and Slavka. So they had a good look at everything from afar—at the gas stove, the folding table and chairs, the tent, and the car.

"Well, grandson, got an eyeful of our holiday makers' riches?" Maximovna asked Sashka. "What haven't they brought along! Study hard, my boy, maybe you'll get to be someone too. The money he must be raking in! Driving about the holiday places in his own car, and his missis not working anywhere...."



2

Yurka did not care if Yulia Ivanovna worked or not. What was it to him? And their things? What were things anyway? Sure, he wouldn't mind having a tent like theirs and living in it all summer up on the knoll or down

on the beach. It was so bright and gay that even in bad weather you'd think it was sunny outside. As for the gas stove, he could do without. Sure it was better than their stinking kerosene stove, but it was only good while the gas lasted and when it was used up they'd have to go all the way to Moscow to get the cylinder refilled. You couldn't sell it to anyone here, so it would just be kicked about the place. Money, of course, was a good thing to have, money was. He would go to town every Sunday to see a picture and eat icecream. Yurka only handled money when Ma sent him on his bike to buy something in Lomovka or Grokhovka, which certainly took some pedalling! But Ma knew all the prices and he had to give her the change down to the last kopek, because at home every kopek counted. No, he'd never have so much money or things like theirs, no use dreaming about them and moping. Yurka did not mope. He wasn't envious by nature. He had what he had, and what he didn't have—to hell with it.

He was thinking of something else. Ma often said that this wasn't life, it was sheer misery, that some people had all the luck and she had none, and when fighting with Pa she always brought in their *poor* children.... Why poor children, Yurka tried to puzzle it out and never could. Sure, he had trouble in school sometimes, and also got it in the neck from Ma and Pa. So what? It was just one of those things.... No, Yurka did not feel a *poor child* at all. The only thing that worried him was that he was growing so shy. He wasn't before, or maybe he didn't notice it, but he did notice it now and became all the shier. When he was alone or with Slavka and Mitka, he could hit a brick at twenty steps with a pebble, he could jump down from the roof and not hurt himself, he never dropped things, and did everything quickly and smartly, but in the presence of others he became clumsy and awkward, tripped and dropped things, stumbled along like a hobbled horse, his hands and feet suddenly felt huge and unwieldy and he did not know where to put them, he tried to seem free and easy, which only made it worse, people scolded him and he grinned. He didn't grin because it was funny but simply because of his hateful shyness, and people didn't understand and scolded him harder than ever. Otherwise he'd be perfectly happy, and the only thing he wanted in life was to get rid of this gawkiness and behave as if he owned the earth like, say, Pa.

When he was younger he wanted to be like his Pa. Not in everything, of course. Pa was fond of drink and when he had a drink too many he'd start picking fault with everyone, using bad language and hitting out at anyone who crossed him. And then he'd totter to bed, and in his sleep he'd moan, scream and wheeze, gurgling and choking as if he were drowning or having his throat cut, and it was so frightening that Yurka would rather he

quarrelled than slept. He'd be sick for two days afterwards. But when he was sober there was no one to hold a candle to Pa. There was nothing he didn't know, he'd been in different towns and had actually lived in Yevpatoria, he could say how-d'you-do like no one else, tell different stories, paint beautiful pictures, and the moustache he wore was also like no one else's. True, Grandpa once said to him:

"Look, Alexander, you might grow a proper moustache or shave it off altogether.... It's like black snot under your nose."

Let Grandpa say what he wanted. Yurka liked Pa's moustache: two neatly trimmed lines running down his upper lip. Yurka once painted on a moustache like Pa's with a bit of charcoal. It looked funny, and he made it funnier still by painting the moustache right across his cheeks, to his ears. Slavka saw him and also painted on a moustache, and Mitka did the same, and when Ma came home from work they all got hell for it, Yurka more than the others, naturally.

With the arrival of Vitaly Sergeyevich everything began to change little by little. And the longer he was there, the more things changed. Pa was still Pa, of course, but he seemed to shrink somehow, and Vitaly Sergeyevich overshadowed him more and more. It wasn't because Vitaly Sergeyevich was tall, thin and bony, while Pa was short. He wasn't small, but still he was shorter than anyone else, even Ma. Height wasn't what mattered, though. It was simply that Vitaly Sergeyevich and Pa were so different. In everything. They talked, walked and did everything differently. Even when Pa was standing still he seemed to be in a terrible flurry—shuffling his feet, turning this way and that, moving his hands and fingers, smiling, mouthing, frowning, screwing up his eyes, and fidgeting generally. Yurka didn't notice it before, or maybe he paid no attention, but with the arrival of Vitaly Sergeyevich he did begin to notice it and to dislike his father's fidgeting more and more, feeling as embarrassed as if it were he himself who fidgeted and not Pa. Vitaly Sergeyevich was never in a flurry. Yurka watched him stealthily many a time when he was silent or deep in thought—he would sit for half an hour and more, staring into space, and nothing stirred in his face, not his wide, tightly shut mouth nor the deep lines in his hollow cheeks. His manner was the same with everyone. With Grandpa, Maximovna, Ma, and the kids. His voice was calm and not loud, but, funny thing, when he began to speak everyone fell silent and listened, and he seemed to know for certain that that's how it would be and did not raise his voice to shout the others. Oh well, Senka-Angel hit the nail on the head when he said he was an authority. And that time he and Grandpa drank together, look how fuddled Grandpa got, and he, he was none the worse for it, he did not yell, bawl songs or curse even once....

That's the kind of person Yurka wanted to be. Calm, strong, and "an authority". He tried his hardest to find something in himself that would make him resemble Vitaly Sergeyevich and did not find a thing. True, he did have the same wide mouth, about which he was always teased in school. But what's in a mouth....

Yurka, Slavka and Mitka were so happy on the tamarisk knoll, it was so jolly and exciting there, that they'd never leave the place if they could help it. But everyone scolded — Ma and Maximovna, Grandpa and Pa — and called them to shame for making a nuisance of themselves. The boys tried not to be a nuisance, but still they kept running to the knoll. The newcomers did not mind. Vitaly Sergeyevich told them they could call Yulia Ivanovna Auntie Yulia, and him Uncle Vitya, and come to see him whenever they liked, provided he was not busy. They did start calling him Uncle Vitya, but for some reason they were shy of Yulia Ivanovna and never called her auntie anything — just Yulivanna. At first they could not understand why a grown-up, almost an elderly man like Uncle Vitya was still studying, but it turned out that he wasn't studying at all but writing a book from which others would learn how to build houses and all kinds of structures.

He wrote in the mornings. Yurka and Slavka busied themselves with their own affairs, or hung about the knoll, peeping from behind the shrubs to see if Vitaly Sergeyevich was still sitting at his table or not. If he wasn't, they went straight to him, with Mitka always tagging behind. If Yulivanna was still around, she said:

"Here comes your gang.... And where's your good-morning?"

"Good-morning," Yurka and Slavka said together, feeling ticked off.

They were always forgetting to say good-morning. Mitka did not even say it with Yurka and Slavka. It was quite beyond him why people had to say good-morning all the time when they saw each other every day? If they didn't meet for a month or a year, then perhaps.... And anyway why should people who already knew each other do this greeting business at all?

Yulivanna would take her sunshade, book and towel, and go down to the beach. It was nicer with her gone. She didn't chase them away or scold, but they felt shy in her presence. It was different with Uncle Vitya. They went swimming with him, walking to Donuzlav or just along the beach to gather the pumice the waves had tossed ashore — though none of them had any use for it, and helped him in everything, like washing his car, for instance. They would all pile in and drive to the well. It wasn't much of a ride, but still.... Vitaly Sergeyevich washed the car himself, while the boys drew the

water from the well in turns. It was not a deep well, only about a metre and a half, and Uncle Vitya's pail—a white plastic one with a black handle—did not weigh anything. Afterwards, when the car was gleaming and shining so bright that it dazzled your eyes, they all had a bathe together and drove back to the camp. And talked all the time. About everything under the sun. He knew everything, just everything.... No, not quite. Sometimes he said: "That's something I don't know." Pa never said that. Did that mean that Pa knew more than Uncle Vitya? Or maybe he didn't want to own up?

Yurka was having the time of his life, and things really couldn't be better. But they could, as it turned out. One day a week or so after their arrival, Uncle Vitya said:

"Shall we make a trip to town for provisions, my young friends? Aunt Yulia does not feel like going, but I'm certain we'll manage by ourselves, we men alone."

"In the car?" cried Slavka.

"Alas, a plane I do not have, nor do I expect to have one soon," replied Vitaly Sergeyevich. "So we'll have to go in the car. Do you mind?"

Huh, would anyone *mind*?

"On two conditions, however: you must get your mother's permission, and wipe your snotty noses clean," he said and glanced at Mitka who had a drop of snot under his nose.

They scrubbed their faces so hard they all but scraped the skin off, and did they shine! Ma gave them clean shirts to wear too. Lucky Slavka had cropped hair, but Yurka's forelock stood up on end and, though he tried to plaster it down with water, it behaved all the worse for the wetting, and so he had to put on his cap. Looking their best, Yurka and Slavka marched off to the camp accompanied by the howling of Mitka whom Ma had not allowed to go with them. Yulivanna was still asleep in the tent, but Uncle Vitya was ready and waiting for them, the car was purring softly and grinning with its glittering fangs.

"You're shining like new twenty-kopek coins," Vitaly Sergeyevich said. "Shall we go?"

Yurka and Slavka rushed to the front door and all but came to blows over the seat next to Vitaly Sergeyevich.

"You'll take turns," he told them. "One of you will sit in front on the trip to town, and the other — on the way back."

Yurka climbed in beside him. Rocking gently, the car drove down the knoll. In the gate stood Ma, Lenka, and Mitka, crying his heart out. Slavka poked his head out of the window and yelled like Senka-Angel: "So long! So long!"

Mitka wailed at the top of his voice. The Volga careened on the incline, and straightened up on reaching the high road.

The wind tore into the open windows and rustled the newspaper lying on the ledge in front of the rear window. The house and the knoll, wrapped in a pink mist through which the top of the orange tent showed like the edge of the morning sun, rushed away from them faster and faster, growing smaller and smaller, losing colour and brightness, fading away altogether, while the white road hurled itself under the wheels, the pebbles muttered angrily, and dust curled up like thin smoke behind them. The spit narrowed down—squeezed in by the sea on one side and the shallow, sedge-grown pool of the Donuzlav on the other, and there was a smell of wet salt, slime, hot road dust and tyres.

“Sixty!” yelled Slavka.

He kept jumping up to look at the speedometer. The large hand on the dial wavered at 60, then crawled to the left side and the car began to careen now this way, now that. It climbed up the sand dumps and stopped. The house had already disappeared in a smoky-lilac haze, and the road they had left behind them was also snaking away into this haze.

Here everything still seemed unreal and temporary: the approach road, the wall of the wharf hung with batches of old tyres, and the very banks of the channel dug across the spit. They were only just being fortified, these future banks. Some way from the water, drop hammers were banging away on the red piles easily driving them into the sand. A furiously smoking tug was hauling a dredge boat across the channel from the sea to the estuary. The empty boat was tossed about by the fresh wave, and the towing rope violently whipped at the water making it splash up in a glass-like wall. On the other side of the channel smoke poured from the galley stack of the double-deck white guard-ship where the building workers lived, and next to it towered the cranes with their jibs raised like elephant trunks, and mountains of sand. Tall framework towers connected by a cable and with searchlights mounted on them stood at either side of the channel.

A lorry stopped just behind the Volga, almost touching it.

“Salute! Salute!” yelled the driver and waved.

“Senka-Angel, you!” Yurka gasped. “Where are you going?”

Senka climbed down from his cab, kicked viciously at one of his tyres, spat on the ground, and sauntered towards the Volga.

“May he roast in hell!”

“Who?”

“Whoever first got the bright idea to put patches on tyres. They peel like hard-boiled eggs, and you’re supposed to get somewhere....”

"Are you also going to town?"

"Sure. To fetch solar oil."

"But what about the water?"

"Petro's back. I've been a water-carrier long enough."

"Yes, but Petro refuses to bring it to our place!"

"What's this got to do with me? Let your Grandpa come to terms with him."

"Is Angel your surname?" Vitaly Sergeyevich asked.

"Oh, no, it's a nickname."

"What did you do to earn it?"

Senka's eyes twinkled as he started enumerating his virtues, folding back a finger for each one:

"I'm a front-ranker of the collective farm; I don't drink; I don't smoke; I don't beat my wife although I ought to; I don't quarrel with my boss. Doesn't it make me an angel? The very picture of one!"

Yurka and Slavka had seen an angel in a book Maximovna had, and he looked like a curly white lamb. Senka—a squat, bald-headed man, wearing grimy overalls and smelling of oil and grease, did not resemble that pale, skinny lamb in the least. Vitaly Sergeyevich must have thought so too.

"In the old days angels were pictured differently," he said.

"Well, that was in the old days," Senka laughed. "There are different standards for angels nowadays.... Now take a look at that: there was a road here once, straight as an arrow. They went and ploughed it up, and now we have to wait for the ferry boat. And in storm we just sit kicking our heels until it's over."

"It's a temporary inconvenience," Vitaly Sergeyevich said. "Only while the construction is on."

"All the better for us drivers—an extra sixty kilometres to go all the way round the estuary. And go it we will too, orders are orders for us, soldiers."

"The construction is more important...."

"It's the same everywhere, one job is always more important than the other. Only we are not important...."

"Who?"

"People in general."

"But it's for the good of people that everything is being done, you know."

"You don't say? Well, naturally...."

"And there will be a town here, too. It's best starting from scratch, it gives the builders and architects plenty of scope...."

"There'll be plenty of everything, that's for sure...."

The ferry boat left the opposite bank and, ploughing through the water with its blunt bow, started towards them. Actually it had no bow. And no stern either. The front and the rear were both hacked off as it were. In the middle rose the captain's bridge and there, in a glass cabin, stood the captain. Cars were lined up, two in a row, between the tall sides, and they huddled together like sheep in a flock.

When the ferry boat had bumped into the tyres on this side, the sailors threw the mooring-lines on to the thick pipes driven into the wall, and lowered the gangplank which had been knocked together from thick boards and bound with metal. At a signal from the captain, the boatswain waved the front car on and shouted: "Get going!"

The cars moved forward cautiously like horses entering an unfamiliar ford, and one after the other crawled over the gangplank, their gears grating as they changed speed. Once over the sand dumps, the drivers stepped on the gas, the engines gave a great roar, and the cars vanished in the clouds of white dust they raised.

While the ferry was being unloaded, a long line of cars had queued up behind the Volga. It was their turn now. They drove as cautiously on to the ferry boat and stooped, huddling together. Something was heaving madly under the deck, sending a shiver through the deck and making the cars on it shiver too. Yurka and Slavka poked their heads out to look over the side. They saw the white blobs and pink domes of jellyfish tumbling over and over, chased along the green water by the current and the whirl raised by the screw propeller. White-capped waves, smaller than sea waves, ruffled the water of the estuary. You could not see where the estuary ended. Pa said that it stretched for thirty kilometres, so how could you see?

The ferry boat bumped into the tyres on the opposite bank and again mooring-lines were thrown on to the pipes driven into the wall. Packing cases were stacked on the shore here, rising as tall as houses, and cables, wound round huge wooden spools, crawled and twisted over the sand, like leaden snakes, to the cranes and compressors. Here, too, drop hammers banged on the ringing steel piles, the compressors hissed and their diesels roared deafeningly. Bulldozers, roaring and jangling, pushed heaps of sand about with their blunt noses.

The Volga carefully picked its way through this maze of obstacles, crossed the stretch of rough cobbles, and was safe on the asphalt road at last. The wind hit the windows like a pounding sea wave and wailed more and more piercingly and shrilly. The highroad ahead was free of traffic, and the speedometer hand moved from 70 to 80, then to 90 and stood trembling at the 100 mark.

Slavka turned pale, gripped the back of the front seat and stared with fascination and terror at the black ribbon of asphalt which also seemed to turn paler and paler from fear as it disappeared faster and faster under the wheels of the car.

Yurka was not frightened. True, his breath did catch at first and he glanced in alarm at Vitaly Sergeyevich. But the latter sat looking calmly at the road as if nothing was wrong. One needn't be afraid with *him* at the wheel! Yurka stopped worrying and also watched the road. A quarry flashed past on their right. Stone was quarried there for the road, but there was nobody there and nothing exciting anyway—just a large pit with heaps of broken stone in it. Popovka came into view a long way off the road with its dreary rows of houses. They had lived there years ago when Pa was a shepherd. But then he had a row with someone, and they had to leave. It had been miserable there for them. Yurka remembered that he had always been hungry, so best not to remember.... And he stopped remembering, and just looked at the places they flew past, listened to the shrill whistling of the wind, and hoped the thrill would not end to soon.

But end it did. A boarding with a “Road Closed” sign appeared before them, and there was a plywood arrow pointing to the left. They had to make a detour before they entered town. The car crawled forever almost at a walk over the dusty dirt road. Gantry cranes stood with their arms outstretched, and unfinished box-like houses stared at the road with their empty eye-sockets....

They drove into town. The long, squat station building remained on their left as they turned off the asphalt at the light signal and started jolting over the cobblestones to the market place. Yurka knew the place because he used to come here when he was staying with Granny.

“Uncle Vitya, there’s the market place now,” Yurka said. “We’ve arrived.”

“I have to do the decent thing first,” Vitaly Sergeyevich replied. “Send a postcard, or at least a telegram.”

He parked at the post office and went inside. Yurka instantly moved over to the driver’s seat and gripped the wheel to see how it felt and to show Slavka how he’d look driving a car one day. Yurka pressed slightly on the pedals in the secret hope that the car would move forward, if only a tiny step. But the brakes were on and the car did not budge. Slavka also wanted to hold the wheel. Yurka did not want to let him but had to give in, seeing that Slavka was in his fighting mood, shaking all over and turning white as chalk. Pity there were no kids about to see and envy them. There was a great long queue of vacationists getting letters at the PO Box window,

but none of them took the slightest notice of the Volga or the boys sitting in it.

After that they went to buy stuff at the market and the grocery. At the bakery they bought bread and buns with a crunchy sugar crust — Yurka and Slavka were given one each and gobbled them up. And then, in spite of their half-hearted “no thank you’s”, Vitaly Sergeyevich bought them some meat pies from a street peddler and they ate them there and then, squirming from shyness. Vitaly Sergeyevich parked his car opposite the icecream and lemonade booth, and took the boys there. They didn’t have to be coaxed any more, and each had an icecream cone.

“What will you drink?” Vitaly Sergeyevich asked them.

The array of bottles on the counter was too confusing, and Slavka pointed at random. Vitaly Sergeyevich bought two bottles: it was something called *Bouza*. A thick, bubbly foam gushed from the dark green bottles, much like milk when it boils over. The drink was sweet and it prickled the tongue and the roof of the mouth.

“Like it?” Vitaly Sergeyevich asked. He himself drank mineral water which smelt of rotten eggs.

“M-mm,” hummed Slavka and, swallowing, said: “Real good!” sticking up his thumb.

Both Slavka and Yurka tipped their bottles over their glasses with such care lest a drop would remain undrunk, that Vitaly Sergeyevich bought them another bottle each.

“Sure you won’t burst?” he asked, watching them with concern.

“And leave some in the bottle?” Slavka was horrified.

They were filled to the brim, there was a heaviness in their stomachs, they kept belching, but it was a pity to spit the fizzy stuff out.

They were speeding over the black asphalt once more, the hand of the speedometer trembled at 100, the tyres muttered, and the wind dashed about in the back of the car, howling with envy.

Yulivanna was pleased with their shopping, she praised them for everything, and then said sorrowfully:

“But how am I to cook it? There’s no water. I tasted the well water — horrible stuff. You can’t drink it.”

“Let me,” Yurka said, “let me bring you some. On my bike. I’ll take your flasks and fill them. Why not? It’s only four kilometres, it won’t take me long.”

“How much can you bring in those flasks.... If we go at all we’ll go in the car and fill the flasks and the glass jar,” Vitaly Sergeyevich said.

The glass jar was set on the soft rug in front of the back seat and Yurka was told to hold it and see it got safely to the well.

Mitka was again standing at the gate and howling.

"Let's take the cry-baby along, shall we? He feels injured, you know," Vitaly Sergeyevich said and stopped the car.

Lenka came running after Mitka.

"Where d'you think you're going?" Slavka shouted at her. "We don't want any women with us."

"Oh, come, Slava, she isn't much of a woman yet! And what have you got against women, I'd like to know?"

Slavka laughed and shrugged — he didn't really have anything against women.

Mitka and Lenka got into the car. Lenka sat down, but Mitka stood all the way, holding on to the back of the front seat: he could see better like that, and he actually was the first to see Ma and Fyodor.

Vitaly Sergeyevich slowed down and drove to the edge of the road. Ma and Fyodor would scoop up the limestone gravel crushed by the busy traffic, shovelled it into the ruts and then Fyodor would take a dipper of water from the barrel standing on the cart and pour it over the filled-in ruts. Grandpa and Pa sat on the ground, with their legs dangling in the ditch, and smoked. Vitaly Sergeyevich went and sat down with them, and then Ma and Fyodor joined them too. Daughter, who was harnessed into the cart, stood tossing her head and swishing her tail to chase off the horse-flies.

"What is it you're doing?" Vitaly Sergeyevich asked.

"Repairing the road," Grandpa replied.

"But is this secure enough?"

"Might be, if it's left alone."

A clattering, bouncing lorry rumbled past, spraying them with dust. The heavy wheels rolling over the newly filled-in ruts sent the gravel flying.

"That's done it," Pa said. "All our effort's gone phut."

Grandpa glanced at the tail of the lorry and said:

"But what can you do with such people? They won't give it a miss, they go straight for it...."

"It really is a waste of effort," Vitaly Sergeyevich said. "Your work's ruined before you've quite finished doing it! Repairs should be done properly, if done at all."

"To hell with it," Fyodor said. "I've had a bellyful. I'll quit as soon as I've finished my tractor driver's courses. Call this work? It's a laugh. Let them transfer me to some other section."

Grandpa gave Fyodor a look, and turned to Vitaly Sergeyevich again.

"No funds are allocated to us because there isn't going to be a road here

afterwards. We're just keeping it up for the time being. There's going to be a new road built round the estuary."

"That won't be for years," Fyodor said.

"If they want it they'll build it overnight," Pa said. "One fellow in the neighbouring district got a Hero's star for growing maize. An artesian well had been sunk, there was more water than anyone could use, so why shouldn't it grow? All kinds of big shots came to admire this maize, and so the road was asphalted for them within a month. It's so smooth, never a shake, never a jolt, they swing along as if they were rocking in a cradle!"

Grandpa looked at Pa with disapproval. He did not like all this free talk.

"And are you off on a long journey?" he asked Vitaly Sergeyevich.

"Just to Lomovka for water."

"Better go to Grokhovka. It's only a kilometre farther to go, but they've running water there."

And so they went to Grokhovka.

There was no water in the first three pumps they tried, but the fourth one not far from the grocery was working and they filled all the flasks and the ten-litre glass jar.

Yurka was cudgeling his brains all the time for something that would be a nice treat for Vitaly Sergeyevich, and when he saw the regulars gathered at the entrance to Alka's basement, he had a brainwave.

"Uncle Vitya, maybe you'd like some wine? They sell it here."

"Natural grape wine? A glass wouldn't be bad in this heat."

They went to where the regulars were gathered. Roman Zaruba stepped forward, dipping slightly when he set down his wooden leg, and said in a purposely loud voice:

"Greetings and salutations to the Professor!"

Roman was already high. His face was read and sweaty, and his thin hair straggled stickily over his bald pate.

Vitaly Sergeyevich looked at him gravely and said:

"I am not a professor."

"Same thing, an intellect'al you are. I've a good eye, a sniper's eye. I love them intellect'als!"

"I'm glad to hear it," Vitaly Sergeyevich said, and wanted to walk past Roman.

"Listen," Roman said, holding out his hand and staring straight into Vitaly Sergeyevich's eyes. "Gimme a rouble."

Vitaly Sergeyevich did not even seem surprised. He took out a rouble note and gave it to Roman.

"There!" Roman held it up triumphantly to show the other men. "You know why I love them intellect'als? 'Cause they're ashamed of having money."

Some of the men laughed.

"Not like you, misers, you'd die sooner than part with a coin."

Vitaly Sergeyevich went down the basement steps with Roman hobbling behind him.

A lampbulb hung from the ceiling, and at the table sat Alka the hunchback. A pail of water, a large kettle, and two thick glasses stood on the table. Alka dipped one of the glasses into the pail to rinse it and then filled it with a cloudy, greenish liquid from the kettle.

Vitaly Sergeyevich took the glass, raised it to his mouth, sniffed and put it back on the table.

"No thanks. Unwashed, is it?"

"What d'you mean unwashed?" Alka flared up. "You saw me washing it with your own eyes!"

"I don't mean the glass. I mean the grapes."

"Whoever heard of washing grapes?" Roman asked.

"That's why this stuff smells of DDT and some other muck...."

"It suits us alright," said Roman. "Gives it more kick...."

They started back home. Yurka hugged the glass jar and suffered. He meant so well, and his bright idea fell so flat.

"Didn't you like it?" he asked. "Grandpa and Pa say it's good wine."

"Never mind. One can live without wine," Vitaly Sergeyevich said consolingly. "That kind especially."

When they returned home, they washed down the car and went for a swim. Yulivanna came with them. They dived, raced, practised lying on their backs without moving, the way Vitaly Sergeyevich taught them, and then sat down on the sandstone rock to sun themselves. The long, flat block of sandstone was cast ashore in one of the winter storms; a bank of sand had piled up before it, the waves could no longer reach it, and there it remained—the only rock on the whole length of beach from the ferry to Okunyovka. It made a very nice seat. Yulivanna and Vitaly Sergeyevich sat on the rock, while the boys sat on the sand. Then, for no reason at all, Yurka asked Vitaly Sergeyevich:

"Uncle Vitya, do you have children?"

What prompted him to ask this? The thought, perhaps, that life must be wonderful for his children.

Yulivanna got up all of a sudden and went home. Vitaly Sergeyevich followed her with his eyes, and took his time replying:

"I have a son. He's grown-up, and lives on his own."

3



It wasn't only the boys who hung around the newcomers. Maximovna and Ma went running to the camp the moment Yulivanna started cooking, with Uncle Vitya gone. Nyushka did not go as often because she was shy. You couldn't hear what Maximovna and Nyushka said to Yulivanna because they kept their voices low, but when Ma started talking you could hear her from miles away. Maybe her voice was so loud because she shouted and cursed all the time? Ma always told Yulivanna the same old story about keeping the wolf from the door, about Dad's drinking and needing watching all the time before he went and sold what he had on for drink, and because he turned real nasty when he was loaded and might get into any kind of trouble from which there was no getting out, and she also told Yulivanna about the boys not doing well in school.... When Ma, Maximovna and Nyushka got together they talked about Yulivanna and couldn't praise her enough, saying what a good housewife she was, how neat, and not stand-offish at all, understanding, too, which made talking with her a real pleasure, and wasn't Vitaly Sergeyevich lucky to get himself such a kind and loving wife, but then he, too, was an answer to a prayer, with a man like him a woman lived in clover — darling this and darling that, never a cross word or even a look....

The men also liked to visit Vitaly Sergeyevich. Grandpa went often and Fyodor only sometimes. They held unhurried conversations about the economy and politics, about Vietnam and the goings on there, which, they hoped, would end soon because you never knew — anything might happen.... Then Grandpa would go on to space flights, wondering who'd fly to the moon first.

Pa never went. Yurka guessed that he very much wanted to know Vitaly Sergeyevich better and often asked him to come over, but Vitaly Sergeyevich never came. He did not come over to see anyone and no one minded. Pa did. And said it straight out to him once.

"Why do you high-hat us like that? Good neighbours shouldn't!"

"What do you mean?" Vitaly Sergeyevich asked.

"I mean you never come over. We'd sit down nicely and have a real, good talk."

"We can talk here just as well."

"It's not quite the same thing, you know.... Besides, there's something I'd like to show you, and hear your opinion on. You see, I do a little painting...."

"Really? That's interesting."

Pa took him to the workshop where he always did his painting. There was a large work-table there and a clutter of road signs and all kinds of tools, but still there was more space there than in their room, and nobody got in his way.

Pa's pictures, the finished ones and those he had only just begun, hung on the walls. All sorts of things were painted on them, most of which Yurka had never seen. There were mountains pointed like spears, a lot of trees in a bunch called a forest, a yellow moon or else a red sun rising from behind the mountains and the forest, and a lake with white geese floating on it, the geese having such long necks that they twisted like a question mark. There was a different lake on one picture — it was covered all over with leaves the size of a plate and white flowers, and on these leaves and flowers lay a woman with coal-black eyes. She was the colour of their pink toilet soap and quite naked, with only the place it was shameful to show covered with a white scarf that hung somehow in the air. Here, too, there were the white geese with the long necks, and a yellow moon. Yurka could never understand why this fat lump of a woman didn't drown. Now, if he could draw, he would never draw these naked women, he'd draw planes and tanks, or Chapayev charging on a white horse, or maybe the cosmonauts walking about in space. He asked Pa once why he didn't draw such things which was much more fun, and Pa only grinned and said: "A fat lot you understand!"

Of course, Yurka didn't understand everything yet, but one thing he did understand very well was that Pa was a darn good painter. Everything looked so real. You could see every pebble, every blade of grass on his pictures. And everything was so pretty. Prettier even than in real life. If he painted the moon it was the brightest yellow, if he painted the sun it was



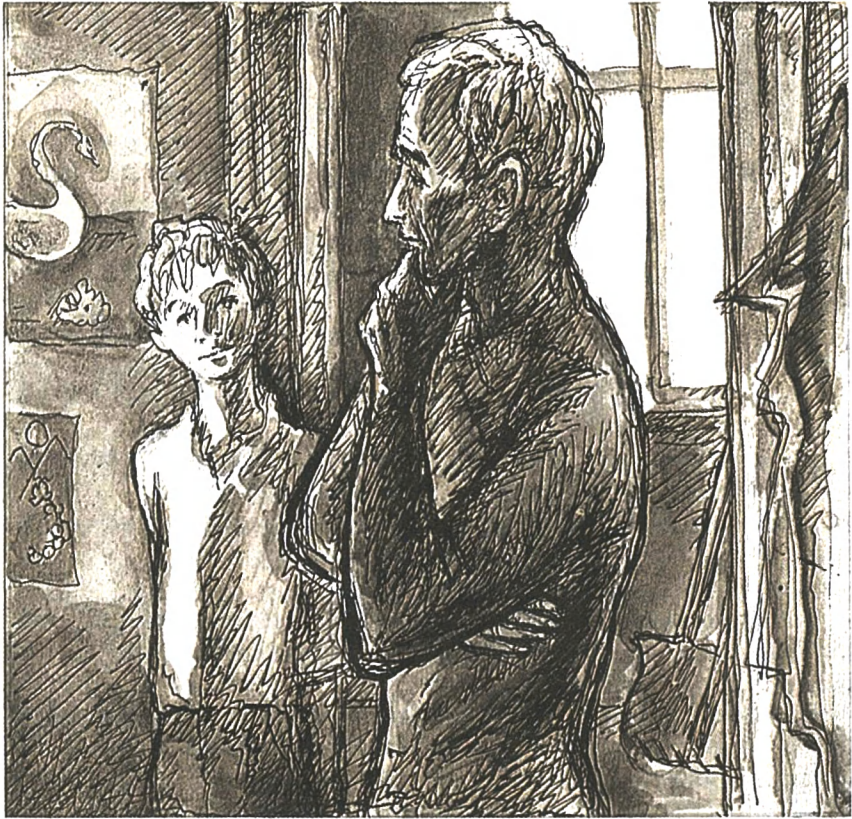
edder than the traffic light at the market place in town, and even in town here were no leaves or grass as green as he painted them....

Yurka shifted his glance from the pictures to Vitaly Sergeyevich to see how he liked them, and Pa was fidgeting more than ever as he told Vitaly Sergeyevich how he painted his pictures from postcards, square by square, and what each picture was called, and how difficult it was to get paints he needed, zinc white especially. Vitaly Sergeyevich kept silent, then he said "Hm," and fell silent again.

"Well, what do you say?" Pa asked at last.

"What can I say? I suppose you paint these pictures for yourself, for our own pleasure?"

"Would I, for myself?" Pa laughed. "That's a rich man's pleasure. Think of the money spent on the paints! You see, at the moment I'm just a



road worker. Temporarily, of course,” he added hastily. “My wage is very small. When I’m unwell and am on sick-leave, I make a little extra.”

“You mean there are people who buy your pictures?”

“They sell like hot cakes. People have become more cultured, you know, everybody wants to live more beautifully.”

“Hm, to think what they have been missing,” Vitaly Sergeyevich said, and fell silent once more.

“Why don’t you criticise my work?” Pa said, putting on a smile. “You’re a person with a higher education, you’re up in art....”

“Everyone is, nowadays, even people who don’t know a damn thing about it.... Why should I criticise you? Essentially, you and I are birds of a feather....”

“Why, that’s just what I mean!” Pa cried happily.

“But if you want to know the truth about your painting, here you are. No one can forbid you to paint. One can only feel sorry that you’re doing it.”

Pa puckered his mouth with a hurt air. Vitaly Sergeyevich turned on his heel and went home, to their camp on the knoll. Yurka didn’t know what to do at first, and then he ran after Vitaly Sergeyevich who took no notice of him and strode on with his eyes on the ground and his thick, black eyebrows drawn together in a frown. Yurka used to think that his eyebrows were as white as his hair and were only dyed black, but then he guessed he was wrong—the paint didn’t come off when Vitaly Sergeyevich dived, which he often did when they went swimming together, and so his eyebrows must be naturally black.

“Uncle Vitya, why didn’t you like it?” Yurka asked. “Doesn’t Pa paint well?”

“He can’t paint at all. But the trouble is not just in how he draws but *what* he draws....Oh well, you wouldn’t understand this....”

Yulivanna was packing the green bag which she always took down to the beach with her.

“Does he paint well?” she asked.

“Horribly. And he sells his paintings too. Typical market-stall stuff. But what can you do? There’s no provision for it in the criminal code....”

“You’re exaggerating as usual, I’m sure. You always go to extremes, you know. Let the man paint if he wants to. What’s it to you?”

“It’s not as simple as that, Yulia darling.”

“Here you go, complexes and reflexes and things. There are more than enough complexities in life, no need to invent them. A dip in the sea would be much nicer, come along.”

Vitaly Sergeyevich shook his head, and Yulivanna went off alone. Yurka wanted to go away, but then he thought that if he hung around while Vitaly Sergeyevich got over his anger he’d tell him why he didn’t like Pa’s pictures.

Vitaly Sergeyevich sat at the table clutching his hands so hard that the knucklebones stood out sharp and white. First he stared straight in front of him, then he shifted his glance to Yurka and stared at him so long and so fixedly that Yurka began to fidget, and all but decided to go away when he realised that Vitaly Sergeyevich simply didn’t see him, though he stared straight into his eyes. Vitaly Sergeyevich shifted his gaze again, fixed it on Yurka and only then saw him.

“If you have children and they start dabbling in art, whip the daylights out of them. As a warning. Understand?”

Yurka grinned. Vitaly Sergeyevich was joking, of course, and you had to grin at a joke.

"However, I'm talking rot. It doesn't help either the fathers or the children," Vitaly Sergeyevich said.

He went to his car, opened the luggage compartment and took out a bottle with some brown liquid in it. Yurka already knew that it wasn't tea. He had read the word "Cognac" on the first such bottle Vitaly Sergeyevich had thrown away. Choosing the largest of the plastic cups that fitted one into the other, Vitaly Sergeyevich first poured it half-full, then, thinking better of it, filled it to the brim and drank the stuff up. He saw Yurka again, took a handful of sweets and put them on the table before him.

"Help yourself," he said.

Vitaly Sergeyevich did not take a sweet himself. He sat staring at the table and rubbing his chin with his open hand. Yurka finished his sweet, but was too shy to take another one, and waited to see what would happen next.

"No," Vitaly Sergeyevich said suddenly, obviously addressing himself. "No, you were a swine. You wouldn't tell that to Rastorguyev, would you?... Look, Yuri, take a quick run home and tell your father I'd very much like to see him right away. Got it? Very much!"

Pa made a huffish face and refused to go at first, but soon changed his mind and went anyway.

"What do you want here?" he snapped at Yurka who had come along too. "Beat it!"

"But why?" Vitaly Sergeyevich said. "Let him listen and get some sense into his head.... I want to explain why I spoke the way I did about your pictures. But let's have a drink first."

He wanted to drink up without any fuss, but Pa reached forward to touch glasses, and nothing came of it — no knocking or clinking because the glasses were made of plastic. Some of the cognac was spilled on the table, that's all.

"Powerful stuff," Pa said, looking at the bottle with respect and fanning his open mouth with a hand. Vitaly Sergeyevich pushed the sweets across to him. Pa took one and bit off a tiny piece.

"Now then," Vitaly Sergeyevich began. "You cannot draw, let alone paint. Absolutely."

Pa wanted to get up and leave, but Vitaly Sergeyevich made him stay where he was with a gesture, and Pa did stay and only became terribly fidgety.

"I'm saying this not because I want to hurt your feelings, but because I want you to understand. In art, one must create that which has never been

seen before, which others have never realised or have not succeeded in achieving. Repeating what others have done is, to quote one poet, simply multiplying the number of pugs, that and nothing else. And who wants pugs? Do I make myself clear?"

Yurka did not understand a thing, and neither did Pa because he pursed his mouth and said:

"But I don't paint pugs."

"Figuratively speaking, of course! You can make a thousand plaster cast Apollos or print a million Giocondas, and the whole lot won't be worth a broken penny."

"Yes, but I just do a little for a bit of extra money...."

"At least you're honest about it! There are some who make it a principle to manufacture pugs."

Grandpa had brought Daughter to feed on the rick of barley straw, and when he saw that Vitaly Sergeyevich was having a conversation with Pa, he tied up the horse and joined them.

Vitaly Sergeyevich took out another plastic cup and filled it for Grandpa.

"Well, as I was saying, you're not the only one," he said. "There is an artist whose name is Rastorguyev. A past master. Now when he paints a pug, you can count all the hairs on it. And he flourishes too! He's a prize-winner, and even a member of the academy, I believe.... The odd cases never mind, though. What's far worse is that we have a sculptural factory, and it's actually called that! Do you understand? A factory where sculptures are turned out in batches. The way buttons are stamped. Take a look along the roads and you're sure to see a concrete reindeer or a bear, and then more reindeer and more bears.... There are great herds of them along the roads, numbering thousands of head...."

"That's right," Grandpa said. "We've none here, but I know there are in other places."

"And what about the public gardens and parks?" Vitaly Sergeyevich continued. "All those serial Young Pioneers with bugles, and those giant females with oars, all of them entitled to a whitewashing twice a year! You'll find them in Vladivostok, in Shepetovka, in Arkhangelsk, and in Yalta. It's a propaganda of banality, that's what it is!"

"What is, Vitaly?" Yulivanna asked, appearing from behind the bushes. "I forgot my sunglasses.... Oh, you're having drinks, and without me? Disgraceful!" She glanced at the table, and said: "Oh, Vitaly, aren't you ashamed of yourself? If you're having drinks you should offer your guests a bite of something too...."

Plates, bread and tinned fish appeared on the table as if by magic.

"Me too," Yulivanna said, holding out a plastic cup for some cognac. "Is it an act of self-sacrifice again to leave me less of the poison?" Vitaly Sergeyevich asked with a smile.

"Not at all. I simply want to get drunk, blotto, and get the kick you, men, get from being plastered.... What were you so angry about?"

"Art. But I'm afraid I took the wrong key...."

"You seem to have bored everyone stiff," Yulivanna said.

Pa wasn't bored stiff at all; he no longer listened to Vitaly Sergeyevich and was busy thinking about something.

"Do you know this artist person?" he asked.

"Rastorguyev? No."

"I wish I could meet him! But what chance have I? I haven't the money or the health to go to Moscow."

"Are you unwell?" Yulivanna asked Pa. "You look perfectly healthy, you know."

"I only look it," Pa smiled bitterly. "I was so badly shell-shocked in an air-raid that I had to stay in hospital for six months, and the first two months I was completely blind. The army surgeon warned me that if I wasn't careful I'd have a ... relapse, he called it. And here I am compelled to do physical work."

"You're surely not allowed to drink!" Yulivanna exclaimed.

"Not a drop."

"But why do you then?"

"A life like mine drives me to it.... Do I really live? It's a perishing existence...."

"Come, son, it's just life, as good as anyone's, and as for drink, you like yours too well," Grandpa said.

"And I myself am as good as anyone," Pa said hotly. "Here Vitaly Sergeyevich has just said that my paintings are no worse than those of Rastorguyev, a famous artist."

"I never said that, what I said was that in principle you and he were doing the same thing...."

"You heard him?" Pa asked Grandpa. "I'll leave this place and then you'll see...."

"And where will you go?" said Grandpa. "No one can see you here, you plod along and it's all right. Anywhere else you'll have to work for your money. And what kind of a worker are you? You talk big, that's all...."

"Who, me?!"

"Let's not quarrel," Vitaly Sergeyevich said. "Shall we allow ourselves one more little drink?"

They did. Pa followed his drink with a bit of fish and, twirling a piece of white bread in his hand, said:

"I can't eat rye bread, my stomach can't take it, and where can I get white bread in this godforsaken hole?"

"Beware of rye bread!" Vitaly Sergeyevich pronounced with a smile, and said: "Greensickness comes from eating rye bread and living with a faithful wife."*

"Do you prefer unfaithful wives?" Yulivanna asked him.

"Only when they're the wives of others."

Yulivanna laughed and shook a finger at Vitaly Sergeyevich.

"You just try!"

"Begging your pardon," Grandpa said, "there's one thing I'd like to know. Now, you build houses, I understand. How do you get paid, by the job or in some special way?"

Vitaly Sergeyevich frowned.

"Architects are paid a salary, like engineers and other people. But I have given up active designing."

"A great pity," said Yulivanna. "I thought the world of your designs."

"And what did they turn into? A cross between a swallow and a hog?" He glanced at Pa's and Grandpa's puzzled faces and said: "I'm sorry, this is of no interest to you, I'm sure...."

"Why not?" Pa said very politely. "It's very interesting."

"What I'm saying is this. An architect conceives a building in his mind and drafts the design. But he is never allowed to do everything as he wants it, and the result is not a building but a bastard, soft-boiled boots, grilled semolina pudding...."

"You must've been hurt pretty bad in your line of business," said Pa.

"Never mind my personal feelings," Vitaly Sergeyevich said with a gesture of dismissal. "A man must be proud of what he has created.... Perhaps not proud, but anyway...."

"Like God," put in Yulivanna. "He created and *saw that it was good.*"

"Yes, something like that. Until now I was never able to say it. Not once."

"But you did build houses, Vitaly! And very well, too."

"What does 'well' mean? An artist must have the feeling that he is creating something of primary importance, something useful and much needed, and what do we build? Palaces, nothing less than palaces. Palaces of sport, palaces of marriage registration, palaces of Young Pioneers,

* From a poem by Eduard Bagritsky.— *Ed.*

palaces of culture.... I, too, have a palace like that on my conscience. The style is a Soviet type of *empire*, as was the fashion in those days. It's a gorgeous palace of culture. People come there to hear a lecture on culture, but they come there unwashed because they have no place to wash. There is no bathhouse in the village. You say that everybody wants to live a more beautiful life, but it should be a cleaner life to begin with."

"That's right," Grandpa agreed. "We have no bathhouse in our village either. You have to go to town if you want a good wash, but the nearest town is all of forty kilometres away, so who'd ever think of going?"

"Vitaly, you are getting carried away and exaggerating as usual," Yulivanna said.

Vitaly Sergeyevich glanced at her, pulled himself together, and his excitement fizzled out.

"Yes, you're right, of course. The whole of this conversation is a waste of breath..." he said.

Grandpa was already wrinkling up his face blissfully, Pa was fidgeting and glancing at the empty bottle, obviously wanting more. He had obviously stopped listening altogether.

"What's his name and patronymic, the academician's, I mean?" he asked Vitaly Sergeyevich the moment he fell silent.

"I don't know."

Pa and Grandpa talked a little about the weather, telling the newcomers that it was never hot like that until July and that storms were rare in May, and if they did happen they were only brief ones. Then they got up and left.

Vitaly Sergeyevich sat on at the table, deep in thought. Yulivanna kept glancing at him as she cleared the table, and then she asked him:

"What came over you all of a sudden—this campaign against palaces, and the paeon to bathhouses?"

"You know very well that it wasn't all of a sudden. It's always with me."

"Yes, but why now? And speaking for an audience which obviously didn't understand a word?"

"Does one always speak for an audience?... Why now? Because I saw the man's daubing.... It's not very pleasant to see a parody of yourself. And a spiteful one, too."

"I don't see the connection."

"It's obvious! He believes that his daubing makes the life of people more beautiful. In the final count, we're doing the same thing. And when you begin to make a summing up...."

“Already?”

“There’s no getting away from this,” Vitaly Sergeyevich touched his grey hair. “There is a time for everything, said Ecclesiastes. A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which is planted. A time to cast away stones.... What is there left for me to do except to cast stones? At myself....”

“You poor thing! You never accomplished anything, did you? But what about the house in Khoroshovka? And the children’s health home? And the...”

“Just first-tries, approaches, attempts.... I had some brain children. They were corrected for me, they were ruined, but I ceded one point here and a second one there, and acquiesced. The result was freakish. I couldn’t endure it and escaped into theory. And what did I do as head of the chair? Did I start a school of my own, did I rear any bold innovators? Did I achieve anything?”

“And me, don’t I count? If you hadn’t come to the chair....”

“You—yes! You, I did achieve. Ah, Yulia, if only it had happened earlier!”

“It might have. It’s your own fault.”

“I entreat you, don’t bring that up, at least while we’re here....”

“But why must I...”

Yulivanna suddenly noticed Yurka sitting there, and stopped short. Yurka felt horribly awkward. He had realised long ago that he ought to go, but he did not want to attract notice and did not know how to slip away quietly, so he just sat on, and they might suspect him of wanting to eavesdrop on what they said. He got up now and went home.

Zhuchka jumped at him with her tongue lolling, and he kicked her away from sheer self-disgust, feeling sorry for the poor dog the next instant because no one had thought of filling her bowl with water in this heat. He went into the house and came out with a dipper of water and a piece of bread. Zhuchka lapped up all the water thirstily, then gulped down the bread, and stared at Yurka expectantly, hoping for more. She stared and stared, wagging her tail now and again, but Yurka had already forgotten about her, and so with her chain clattering she turned away, and lay down in the sandstone kennel where it was nice and shady. And Yurka stood gazing at the pink knoll, with the awning heaving slightly in the breeze and the corner of the orange tent burning bright in the sun. He was wondering who Vitaly Sergeyevich was so angry with and for what, but for the life of him he could not understand it. He said that Pa could not draw and in the next breath that there was a famous artist who was doing the same thing,

and then something about palaces and bathhouses. Yurka had never seen any palaces. Nor bathhouses. Ma washed them in the tub. It was a good thing she didn't wash them often. A lot of water had to be fetched from the well, it was cold running about naked and wet, the room was steamy and damp, and Ma yelled at them. Mitka always raised a screech when Ma washed him. He hated it. But Vitaly Sergeyevich didn't mean this at all. He was angry about something, but he used such high-sounding words that neither Pa nor Grandpa understood them. Yurka saw it, and so it was no use asking them. Grandpa would say: "Another man's soul is a forest dark" or maybe: "Just mind your own business and let people mind theirs." He always said that. And Pa had probably taken offence at what Vitaly Sergeyevich said, and would say nasty things about him....

There was Ma calling everyone home. This meant that she had come back from work and it was time for dinner. Yurka had been feeling hungry for hours, and so he went indoors.

"Where's Pa?" Ma wanted to know. "Go and look for him."

Pa was nowhere to be found. He was not in the yard, he was not at the camp where Mitka ran to see, he was not on the beach.

"Where's he gone to anyway?" Ma yelled.

Fyodor came out of his room and told Ma that Pa had gone to Grokhovka. He got a lift and went.

"What for?"

"What does a man go to town for? He asked me to come along, but I'm broke."

"And he's flush, is he?" Ma screamed. "He'll get plastered again at that hunchback's place, running up a debt."

Maximovna said that all hunchbacks were mean. But Alka wasn't, though she was a real hunchback, with a hump both in front and behind. She was kind, she let people have wine without cash. Only those, of course, who paid her afterwards. It would be better if she were mean like all hunchbacks and didn't trust people....

"Yurka, take your bike and go bring him home," Ma told him.

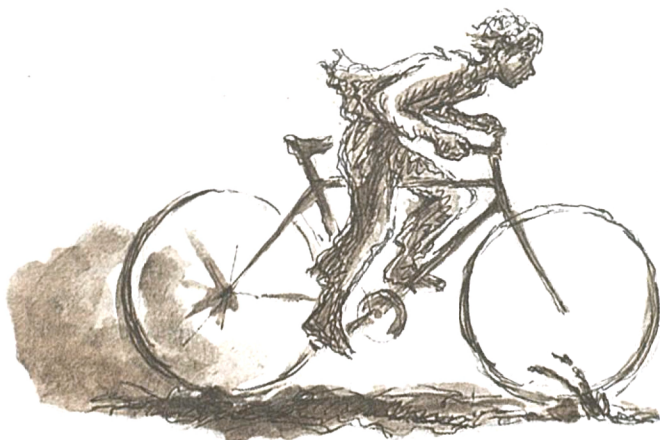
"As if he'll listen to me. And I'm hungry, Ma."

"You won't die. Here," Ma thrust a piece of bread at him. "Do as you're told."

"Oh, Ma, I don't want to go...."

"And I, do I want to slave for the blasted lot of you and be a keeper to that drunk? Lord, why did I have to get landed with him...."

Yurka wheeled his bicycle out of the corridor and pedalled off to town.



4

Some men stood smoking and talking at the entrance to the basement saloon, but they were drifting away one by one as the sun was already setting behind the slope which hid Okunyovka from view. Pa was sitting with Roman under the shed where the trucks were parked. On a sandstone brick before them stood the dented mess-tin which Roman always carried about with him. They were already drunk. Pa was talking and fidgeting terribly. Roman was not listening. His face looked bloated, and his eyes stared into nothingness with stony concentration. He had unstrapped his wooden leg and it lay on the ground beside him. Roman was the first to see Yurka and beckoned to him with a finger:

“Hey, Zhorka, come here!”

“My name is not Zhorka,” Yurka replied sullenly, but he leaned his bike against a telegraph pole and did as he was told.

“You here?” Pa turned round. “Did Ma send you shopping? The shop’s already closed.... Look, Roman, you ask him, if you don’t believe me. Go ahead, ask him! He heard the whole conversation.”

Roman ignored Pa and held his mess-tin out to Yurka.

“Here, Zhorka, hold it. Go and bring us some more.”

“Alka won’t trust us for any more,” Pa told him.

“She won’t trust *me*? Roman Zaruba? Why, I’ll...”

“She won’t give any to Yurka. Give it to me, I’ll go.”

Pa took the mess-tin and went to the basement, trying hard to walk straight, but for all his trying he stumbled, swayed to almost a stop, made a few hurried steps, and slowed down again.

Roman followed Pa with unseeing eyes, and then turned his stare on Yurka. An expression of sorts flickered in his eyes, he moved his fingers as if trying to catch and hold it, but the expression was gone. He then sat back and, turning purple, suddenly started bawling his favourite song:

Oh, it's been and gone....

And shut up as abruptly when Pa returned with the refilled mess-tin. Roman put his mouth to it, but he didn't get as much of the wine down his throat as he spilt over his bristly chin, gaping shirt and dirty hairy chest. Pa also took a sip, hastily wiped his mouth, and started off again:

"Look, he'll be my witness, he was there all the time.... I asked him over to my place, to sit and chat like two cultured people.... He's a man with a higher education, he knows what's what, so it would be interesting to hear his opinion, I thought. Well, I showed him my paintings. It's only a hobby, you know, I paint in my spare time.... And it turned out I thought all wrong. He looked and looked, and he must've been struck all of a heap because all he kept saying was: 'My, that's something, that's really something!' Understand? And then he invited me over. I must say he did everything right and proper. By the way, it wasn't vodka we had, it was cognac — powerful stuff! There his wife came home — a nice lady, by the way — and before you knew it she had pretty little plates out and fancy eats, all very posh, in the Moscow style.... Well, of course, they could see the kind of person they were entertaining.... And then he said to me: 'There are only two of you, you and a prize-winning academician by the name of Rastorguyev. You two are all the masters there are. If you draw something, he says, it's as good as real, exactly the way it is. There are some more artists, he says, but they're smaller stuff....'"

Yurka stared wide-eyed at his father and couldn't understand what it was all about. Why was his father telling such lies? It wasn't like that at all, Pa had it the other way about. Vitaly Sergeyevich said that Pa did not know how to paint, and even said something about there being a law.... And the way he spoke about that other artist, he made him out a sort of swindler and not an artist at all.... Did his father get it all wrong, or did he, Yurka? But he hadn't been drinking, he saw how angry Vitaly Sergeyevich was, and with his own ears he heard him say: "You cannot draw, let alone paint. Absolutely." How could Pa have got it all mixed up? Or was he deliberately lying and making the whole thing up? What for? Yurka felt his face and ears burning.

"Pa, let's go home, Ma sent me," he said.

His father waved him away and went on talking. Obviously, it wasn't the first time that he was telling this story, he must have told it to someone already, and now he was telling it to Roman. Maybe Roman had already

heard it, and that was why he wasn't listening and sat shifting his blurred gaze this way and that. The men who had stood at the entrance to the basement had all gone their different ways. Clutching her money-stuffed bag to her side, Alka padlocked the door and also went home.

"Now, you tell me, why should I be stuck here? No, you tell me!"

Roman scowled and swayed from side to side, without saying anything.

"Am I really living here? I'm wasting my life, that's all. Can I live on my salary? And with my paintings I could make a pile.... I'll leave this place, see if I don't. I'll sell all my pictures, collect a bit of cash, and off I'll go to Moscow. You think I won't make good? Ha, you'd be surprised! Once I get away from here, I'll...."

Roman suddenly broke into his song. He gave an ear-splitting bellow and fell silent abruptly.

"Pa, let's go home," Yurka said. "It's going to be dark soon."

"Let me be, can't you see I'm talking to someone?"

Roman gave a strange sort of grunt and lurched sideways. As he fell he overturned the mess-tin, Pa tried to catch it but missed, and the wine trickled away. Pa twisted the empty mess-tin about in his hands regretfully, then put it down on the sandstone, and gave Roman a nudge.

"Hey, pal, have you gone to sleep, or what?"

Roman didn't stir, and suddenly he began to snore so noisily and horribly that he might have been acting. Pa looked about him. There was not a soul in the yard, and lights were already going on in the windows of the houses on the other side of the street.

"Let's go."

He rose to his feet shakily, and started off with a wide, unsteady stride. Yurka took his bicycle and wheeled it along. They passed the cemetery with its white-washed sandstone wall, its likewise white-washed tombstones and crosses made from smoke pipes. Yurka's bicycle bell gave a tinkle as the wheels bumped over the ruts, and Pa turned round.

"My word! Why are we footing it then? Here, give me...."

"Pa, don't, you'll fall off."

"Me? Fall off? Here, get on.... Get on, I tell you!"

Yurka sat on the frame while Pa tried to get on, taking two swings with his right leg and missing every time. At last he got on to the seat, found the pedals, and the bike rolled towards the highroad, careening and weaving crazily. The highroad wasn't far to go. Once they passed the collective farm vineyard on the right, they'd turn down the dirt road running parallel to the highroad. Pa breathed hotly and nauseatingly down Yurka's neck, and it was ticklish and hateful. Yurka expected them to take a toss any minute,



he darted quick looks about him and thanked his stars that the street was dark and deserted and people couldn't see them lurching along.

"Won't be long now," Pa muttered, breathing hotly down Yurka's neck. "Once we're on the dirt road I'll step on the gas.... It's better going fast."

He pedalled hard, and now the bicycle was flying faster and faster, and suddenly it skidded sideways and they went bang into a concrete pole. Yurka flew over the handlebar, crashing into the concrete pole with his forehead and flopping on the ground, while Pa fell on to his left side, pulling the bike on top of himself. The pain was so awful that Yurka could not scream and only moaned, clutching his forehead with his hands. It felt warm and wet under his fingers, and a trickle of blood ran across his temple and down his cheek. Pa was struggling under the bike and swearing foully.

Yurka scrambled up on all fours, pulled his hands away from the ground with an effort, but he was so dizzy that he could not get up, and stayed where he was, sitting back on his heels. When he got his breath back, he pulled the bike towards him, thinking that Pa was also badly hurt and that's why he could not get up. But get up he did, and with surprising ease.

"Blast you!" he said, and gave the saddle a vicious kick.

A lorry jogged along the dirt road, dipping into the ruts and sashing the darkness with sheaves of light. The light slid over the side of the road, over the telegraph pole, and the bike lying on the ground. The ripped tyre had slipped off the front wheel, the rim was bent, several spokes had broken loose and stuck out this way and that. The sight hit Yurka so hard that he forgot about his pain.

"I told you! I told you!" Yurka screamed. "How will I go to school now?"

Pa stood swaying and not saying anything.

"Small matter," he uttered with a wave of disdain. "We'll fix it up."

"You will, I bet. And where's the money?" Yurka whined. His screaming started the pain again in his bruised forehead.

"What's money! You know what I'm going to be now..." Pa muttered. "You just wait a bit. I'll show everybody.... I'll not even bother to fix this old thing. I'll buy you a new bike. See? What's the use of repairing this scrap?... Come to think of it, why buy such muck at all? I'll buy you a motorbike. Ever seen those red Czech ones? Java is the make.... Won't take me long, you'll see...."

Yurka sobbed wordlessly. He didn't believe in any motorbikes, or new bikes, or even in getting this one repaired. There was no money for it, and there wasn't going to be any money. Pa was simply lying and making up

stories. And now he would always have to foot it to Lomovka, even in good weather.

A few sickly lights glimmered in the houses of Lomovka on the other side of the road. Pa also looked in that direction.

"All right, enough is enough," he said. "You go home and I'm off."

"Where to?"

"I'll drop in at my cousin's. On business. Understand? I've got to talk with him."

From the tone in which he spoke, as though he were making excuses, Yurka guessed that Pa had no business in Lomovka at all—he simply hadn't talked his fill and didn't feel like going home. Instead he'd go wandering about the village, looking for friends and telling them stories about Vitaly Sergeyevich praising his paintings, and going on again about that famous painter in Moscow and the wonderful future ahead of him, and everyone would see that he was drunk, they'd know he was lying and bragging, they'd wink at one another and smile, or maybe they'd laugh straight into his face.

"Don't go, Pa! Please don't go."

"Do as you're told and go home."

"Oh, Pa, don't go!"

Yurka caught him by the sleeve, but his father wrenched himself free and took a swing at the boy.

"Go home, or I'll give you one...."

Pa turned to go and as he went down the ditch he slipped and fell. Yurka wanted to run to him, but his father had already gotten up, crossed the ditch, fell down again, and clambered out on all fours. A car coming from the ferry had its headlights full on him for a moment. He stood swaying on his feet, and then crossed the road just in front of the speeding car. The light dazzled Yurka, he screwed up his eyes, and when he opened them again he could not get used to the darkness for a long time. When he could see again, he peered hard, hoping to make out Pa's darker shape, but there was nothing on the other side of the road, nothing but the dim lights of Lomovka in the distance.

"Pa! Let's go home!" Yurka screamed into the darkness.

His father did not answer him.

Yurka bent over his bicycle and felt a sharp stab of pain in his bruised forehead. The wound was no longer bleeding, and the trickle of blood had crusted on his cheek. There was a great big bump on his forehead, it smarted and throbbed all the time, and when he bent his head it gave him a piercing pain. The swelling had spread downwards, and he could barely open his left eye.

He set the bike on its wheels. It couldn't even be wheeled along, let alone ridden, and so he just had to drag it over the ground. The front wheel sort of dipped where it was bent, and the twisted spokes got caught on the fork, snapping and twanging.

Yurka strenuously lugged the bike which had suddenly become so heavy and unwieldy. The Lomovka lights were now far behind him on the left, and on the right he could make out the collective farm's vineyard behind the thin roadside shrubbery. He'd come to the end of it soon, then there'd be the barley field, then maize, and only after that the house would come in sight. It was a long way to go.... All at once Yurka felt faint and sick and, leaning on his bicycle, he bent over. His giddiness became worse, and he vomited. His legs turned to jelly, and sweat poured down his face, his hands, and even his stomach. The bike fell on the ground, and Yurka stepped to the side of the road and lay down on the prickly, dusty grass. The stars gave a lurch and started moving in a circle. Yurka retched again, but there was nothing in his stomach to throw up. He spat and spat and couldn't spit out his bitter, stringy saliva. He shut his eyes for fear that the stars would start moving again if he looked up and he'd want to vomit. A lorry rumbled past. "It'll be the end of the bike if one of them runs over it," Yurka thought, but did not stir. One more lorry drove past, and then another, and yet another. Yurka got sprayed with dust every time. A breeze was already starting up, blowing towards the sea, and the dust was driven to the earth road and farther on, across the barley field to the sea.

The wind made him feel better. He scrambled to his feet, picked up the bicycle and hauled it homewards. He still felt sick but not as badly as before, his head began to ache, and the wound throbbed and smarted. He was terribly hungry too. But at the very thought of food he wanted to retch again, and so he tried not to think about it. He had never felt so rotten in his life. If he weren't so bad he'd probably cry and feel better, but for some reason he could not cry, so there was nothing to make him better, and he was merely working up his resentment. What had he done to deserve this? Why did Pa have to go to Grokhovka, get dead drunk, smash his bike, and be none the worse for the tumble, while Yurka got so badly hurt? And why did Ma have to send him to Grokhovka? As if she didn't know that Pa would not listen to him. And did Pa listen to *her*? And why did Yurka, with his smashed head, have to lug this bike home, it wasn't even a bike any more, it was just scrap, and it was never going to be repaired because there was no money for repairs and would lie around until it became a rusty piece of useless junk to be thrown on the heap outside their fence. Why not leave it there, on the road, for a lorry to run over or someone to pick it up? However, he did not leave it and, clenching his teeth, pushed it on and on.

Fyodor and Nyushka must have gone to sleep; the light was still on in Grandpa's room, but the door was locked. Yurka went round the house. Their door was wide open, and a light from inside fell on the porch. No sooner had Yurka leaned his bicycle against the porch than his mother rushed out and yelled:

"Where is Pa? Where?"

"Gone to Lomovka."

"And you? What did I send you for?" Here she saw the wrecked bicycle and yelled the louder: "You smashed it?! Oh, you rascally brat!" Without taking a swing, she gave him a hard, short punch on the right jaw.

"It's not me, it's Pa who did it!" Yurka screamed.

Ma grabbed her shawl and ran down to the road.

"Turn off the light and go to bed!" she called back from the darkness.

Slavka, Mitka and Lenka stood on the porch and gaped in horror at Yurka. "Ouch, where did you get so hurt?" Slavka asked.

Yurka walked into their room and looked in the mirror. A purple-red swelling covered his left eye, the bump above it had swollen terribly, and from it a trickle of dried blood ran down his cheek. Yurka was not frightened by the sight, only he felt sick again, and quickly turned away from the mirror.

"Pour water on my hands," he told Slavka.

Slavka hurriedly dragged a pail of water up to the wash-basin, dipped in with a tin mug and poured. Yurka's head hurt when he stood like this bending over, his wound throbbed more and more painfully, he was beginning to feel sick again, but he went on splashing water into his face until he had washed off the crust of blood. The swelling over his left eye was so bad that he'd have to pull his lids apart with his fingers if he wanted to see with it. He mopped his face dry somehow.

"Sleep now, yes?" Slavka asked, guessing that Yurka would not tell him anything just then.

Yurka glanced at the iron bedstead which he shared with Slavka, and the tumbled bedclothes. Across the room stood their parents' bed. He saw very clearly what was going to happen, just as it had happened so many times before: Ma would drag Pa home for all his jibbing, she'd try to get him into bed, and he'd show fight and call her names, Ma would also call him names, then he'd go for her and she'd hit him back, then they'd make up and go to bed, or maybe they wouldn't make up and Pa would drop asleep and start snoring.... Yurka gritted his teeth and made for the door.

"Where're you off to?" Slavka asked.

"Mind your own business!" Yurka snapped at him. "And don't you come after me, or you'll catch it hot!"

He shut the door with an angry slam, and stood for a minute on the porch to let his eyes become used to the darkness. The light had been turned off in Grandpa's room; a cold, bluish glow hung over the ferry, and along the road crawled a chain of lorries like so many glowworms, lined up in pairs. The lamp under the awning on the knoll burnt with a serene, even light, and there was also a light in the tent because it showed orange against the sky. This meant that Yulivanna was reading in bed, as she always did, with her flashlight on, and Vitaly Sergeyevich was sitting at the table under the awning. Should he go up there? No, they'd start asking questions, and he was sick enough as it was.

He crossed the yard, and stopped on the other side of the fence. Zhuchka whimpered, begging him to take her along, but he did not take her off the chain. The metal junk dumped there clanked as he stepped on it, and the wild oats rustled underfoot. Daughter gave an alarmed snort, threw up her head, and then went back to crunching the freshly cut grass which Grandpa never forgot to leave her a great heap of for the night. He could hear the sea, invisible in the darkness, but it was quieting down under the night breeze. A hot smell of sun-warmed straw and field mice came from the stack. He lay down on the ground, snuggling against the straw.

The sound of voices awakened him. Pa and Ma were calling him from the yard, now shouting together, now in turns.

"Like hell I'll come out," Yurka said spitefully.

The painful memory of what happened the night before kindled his spite: Ma sending him on a wild goose chase to Grokhovka, Pa getting so drunk, wrecking the bicycle, all but killing him, and then falling and floundering in the ditch, and himself having to drag the broken bike home when he was so badly hurt, and Ma hitting him on top of everything else.... Their voices sounded wheedling, then they sharply ordered him to come home, and finally they threatened him. He would go home tomorrow and get a beating for staying away all night. But just now he wasn't afraid. His resentment against Pa and Ma for all the wrongs and sufferings he had to bear kept mounting. He clenched his fists and shook them in the direction from which came his parents' voices.

"Just let me grow up! Gosh, I'll show you!"

Ma and Pa went away. Yurka fell asleep again. A touch on the shoulder awakened him. Yulivanna was standing on her knees beside him, looking in fright at his wound and the swelling over his eye.

"Good heavens, what happened?" she asked.

"I fell," Yurka said, and turned away. "Off my bike."

"Some fall! But why are you here? Why didn't anyone dress your wound?"

Yurka did not answer. It had quite slipped his mind that they had set up their wash-stand next to the stack of straw and couldn't help seeing him there in the morning.

"Come along," she said resolutely. "Can you stand up? Here, I'll help you."

"Never mind, I don't need help...."

Still, Yulivanna helped him up and kept her arm round his shoulders as she led him to the tent, as if she were afraid he'd collapse or run away.

"Vitaly, get the first-aid kit out, will you," she called while they were still a distance away.

Vitaly Sergeyevich looked round, his eyebrows twitched in surprise and alarm, but he did not say a word, and went to fetch the first-aid kit—a metal box in which there were bandages and all kinds of pill boxes and medicine bottles. Yurka sat down on the folding chair on which he had always longed to sit, and discovered that it was just a chair, only wobbly.

"I'll bathe your wound first," Yulivanna told him. "It will sting a bit, and then I'll bandage it."

"He's a man, he'll endure it," Vitaly Sergeyevich said. "You don't want to bandage it. It's a bad bruise, but the cut is a small one. Put sticking plaster on it. It'll be easier on him, and on those who look at him too."

Yulivanna wound a bit of cotton on a matchstick, and started bathing the wound. Yurka tried to be as brave as possible, but the wound smarted and stung so terribly that tears just rolled down his face.

"Does it hurt?" Yulivanna asked anxiously, leaning over Yurka.

"No," Yurka's voice was strangely hoarse.

Did this hurt? It hurt when he crashed into the post, and later when Ma hit him.... He wasn't crying because it hurt. Yulivanna had such soft, gentle hands, she held his head so carefully and tenderly when she bathed his wound, that all at once Yurka felt desperately sorry for himself, and couldn't control his tears of self-pity.

Vitaly Sergeyevich pretended not to notice. Yulivanna poured some burning stuff on his wound and put two pieces of sticking plaster over it.

"Well now, we've patched you up properly," said Vitaly Sergeyevich. "You can take another toss if you want to."

Yurka overturned his chair as he got up, and almost fell down himself.

"Don't run. Since you've started taking treatment you've got to take the whole course. Sit down and have breakfast with us."

Yurka's shyness would not let him accept the invitation at once, but he was as hungry as Zhuchka, and so he stayed. Yulivanna set a plate before him with a piece of meat on it and some gruel. He never found out what kind of gruel it was because he was having trouble with his fork from which everything kept slipping off, until at last it occurred to Yulivanna to give

him a spoon. After this they had very strong and very sweet tea with biscuits. They were a crunchy kind that melted in your mouth.

And here was Ma coming at a run. Maybe she had sighted Yurka herself, or maybe the kids had and told her. She started scolding Yurka before she was halfway there, putting him to shame for bothering good folks and making a nuisance of himself. Yulivanna assured her that he wasn't a bother or a nuisance, that she had brought him here herself to dress his wound, and it was too small a matter to talk about. Ma snatched this up at once and started screaming that of course it was a small matter, and fancy making all this fuss about falling off a bicycle and getting a bump on his forehead! It would heal as quickly as on a dog! The other day she had all but hacked off a toe with a shovel, and she didn't make a song and dance about it because she was no softy, not having been coddled like some. But just the same, it was good of Yulivanna to have put that plaster on his wound, she would have done it herself but she was simply run off her feet what with one thing and another....

All the time Ma shouted she shot searching glances now at Yurka, now at Yulivanna and Vitaly Sergeyevich, trying to guess whether he had told them what really happened, and depending on this to decide if she should tell the truth or act as if it was just one of those things. She felt at fault and didn't want to admit it, and so she talked and talked with never a pause for breath. Yurka saw right through her and knew that Yulivanna and Vitaly Sergeyevich did too. He was burning with shame for his mother, because no one was asking her for an explanation and here she was making all these excuses, fibbing and wiggling her way out of the mess. Yurka got up and wanted to go away, but Vitaly Sergeyevich, also fed up or perhaps understanding his distress got up too and said:

"Carry on, but please excuse us—Yura and I will go and take a dip. You haven't had a swim this morning, have you? Neither have I...."

Yurka wanted to run, but Vitaly Sergeyevich walked unhurriedly, and the moment they were round the corner of the tent Ma let herself go—she never could keep anything to herself—and told Yulivanna how her good-for-nothing got soused again last night, and how she ran to Lomovka in the middle of the night to look for him, and how she all but carried him home, and how he was sleeping like a log now, while she, after a sleepless night, had to go to work and make excuses for him to Grandpa and soft soap him because how much longer could he keep this shirker on, and wouldn't there ever be an end to it, and why did she have all the bad luck....

The tamarisk shrubs thinned out on the other side of the knoll, the wind blew warm and moist here, crumpling and squashing Ma's shout, and the steady wash of the sea sounded clearer, nearer and louder. The telegraph

wires ringing in different voices along the road were behind them, and here was the sea spreading half-way across the world, and it picked them up and carried them on a gentle sunlit wave. Afterwards, they dried themselves in the sun and then sat down on their sandstone rock. Yurka expected to be questioned all about his fall and everything, but Vitaly Sergeyevich did not ask him a thing. A patrol ship was moving along the horizon, and though it was painted grey it looked blue from afar.

“Lucky fellows,” Vitaly Sergeyevich said, following the ship with his eyes. “I still envy seamen, since childhood, I dreamed of becoming a sailor, but it was not to be, you see, my eyesight let me down, I was short-sighted when I was young....”

The life of seamen, he went on to say, was difficult and rigorous, and therefore manly and splendid, and if he could live his life all over again he’d again dream of becoming a seaman.

Yurka thought he should like that too, only it couldn’t happen for a long time, if it could at all, and so there was no use thinking about it. He stopped listening to Vitaly Sergeyevich and brooded on his own life and why it had to be the way it was and couldn’t be different, and suddenly asked:

“What do people drink for?”

His interruption did not seem to surprise Vitaly Sergeyevich. Still, he thought a little before answering.

“For different reasons. But by and large, no matter what the reason, it’s a weakness of character. Some drink because they are self-indulgent, they have plenty of money, they can afford it and have not the strength to abstain. Others drink because they are unhappy.”

“But, all the same...” Yurka said.

“Of course, it doesn’t make them happier. It actually makes them more miserable. It saps a man’s strength, health, and intelligence—that, especially. But, you see, this poison has the power to stupefy, to befuddle a person, and he begins to see himself as he should like to be and everything about him not as it is in reality at all. A coward fancies himself a hero, a man who’s ugly and slow-witted thinks he is a handsome genius, all troubles and misfortunes seem trifling, and he couldn’t give a care....”

Yurka gave Vitaly Sergeyevich a sidelong glance. How did he know all this? One might think he was in Grokhovka with them last night....

“When he sobers up, he finds himself back in the same old slough of worries and wretchedness,” Vitaly Sergeyevich continued. “And so he gets drunk again to forget about them. He makes a habit of it, and finally he feels he can’t do without drink. It’s catchy like the plague, like an incurable illness. But actually it’s cowardly escape. It’s cowardly and senseless escaping into the bottle. And once you’re in, there’s no way of getting out.

Only death will set you free....” After a pause, he added: “So don’t you pick up the habit. And don’t let anyone talk you into taking a drink or two. There are always good pals to trip you up.”

“What do I want to drink for anyway,” Yurka said. “I’ll leave them. For good.”

“Leave whom?”

“I’ll leave home.”

Vitaly Sergeyevich gave him a thoughtful look.

“Why?” he asked.

“Ah, let them go chase themselves,” Yurka replied, and turned away.

“Because they were mean to you?”

Yurka made no answer, and Vitaly Sergeyevich did not pester him with questions.

“Forget it,” he said. “Once when I was a younster something very mean was done to me, I don’t remember what it was, but at the time it seemed unbearable. I was even younger than you are now. Before the war, boys ran away to the North Pole, and during the war — to the front. Where do boys run nowadays? Nowhere, I suppose.... You can’t run to outer space. Not much was known about the North Pole in those days, and nobody wanted to go to the war. People ran from the front. And we, kids, didn’t know a thing about our own country. What we did know a lot about was America. We knew all about Red Indians, the gold rush and the various travellers. There were a great many such books when I was a boy, we read them to tatters and played Indians and white conquerors. These books are not read any more. I don’t suppose you’ve read any, or have you?”

“No,” Yurka replied.

“No, of course not. And I read and dreamed a lot about America. So when I felt wronged by my parents, I decided to run away. I put on my overcoat, stuffed a loaf of bread inside it, and off I went. In spite of the outrage to my pride, I pinched that bread anyway. I couldn’t do without food, could I? It was a long way to go: first across half of Siberia to Vladivostok which took the train about two weeks to reach in those days, and after that it was all very simple — I’d hide in the hold of a ship as a stowaway, and there I’d be in America. The railway station was packed with people. Wounded soldiers and refugees. The civil war was on, you know. I waited and waited for the train, it was such a long wait that I grew hungry. I got out my loaf of bread. And there, all around me were the starved refugees. The children were especially pitiful. They didn’t ask me for bread, they just looked. And I was ashamed to eat it alone. I broke my loaf into pieces and handed them out to the kids. And without food you couldn’t run far, could you? So I went back home. My father understood

everything. "Did you try to run away?" he asked me. "Yes," I said. "And where's the bread you took?"—"I gave it away to the refugees, they were hungry."—"That's your luck, you fool, otherwise I'd give you a good hiding. People run away from disaster, and what did you run from? Off with you to bed!" On the morrow I felt less unbearably wronged, and then I forgot the thing altogether. A child's tragedy is like a summer shower—it's over quickly, and the sun shines again...."

"Sure, it's alright for you to talk," Yurka said.

"Try to understand that running away is not a solution to your problems. Running away is another act of weakness, of cowardice. I know that life is hard on you just now, I do understand. But it won't always be like that. Look at the construction going on here, even here in Tarkhankut. Over there," he pointed at the oil derricks, "oil and gas have been found. A new town will spring up. Windbreaks will be planted to protect the whole peninsula, orchards will be laid out, and vineyards. This is good soil for vineyards. No fresh water? Water will be found too, extracted from under the ground. And who is it all being done for? For you, for boys like you. For you personally...."

"You mean it will make Pa stop drinking and cursing? Or having fights with Ma?" Yurka did not say this aloud, he only made the objection mentally. He was no good at arguing, and was too shy to do so with Vitaly Sergeyevich anyway.



5

Vitaly Sergeyevich proved right—on the morrow everything was quite different. The bump on his forehead had become smaller and softer, the cut didn't throb any more, and hurt only when Yulivanna pulled off the old

plaster and stuck a new piece on. The very accident now appeared to Yurka in quite a glamorous light, and he enjoyed telling everyone about it, embellishing on it a bit and fibbing a little: he was thrown clear over the handlebar, crashing head-on into the telegraph pole, and then he just picked up his bike and lugged it home, none the worse for the bruise on his forehead. That's how he told the story — somehow he did not remember how sick he was and what tortures he suffered, but recalled only the things that elevated him and made him a hero in the eyes of Slavka and Sashka. Senka-Angel came over to borrow some oil from Grandpa and had a look at the bicycle. The front fork was cracked, he said, but his pals at the smithy would solder it as good as new and even better, and he'd get the wheel changed too. If it were the rear wheel, with the brake, it would take a bit of hunting, but the front wheel he'd find in two shakes; he actually believed he had one, lying around somewhere....

The swelling went down, the eye was beginning to open, the bruise took on various colours growing more and more yellow, and a few days later Yulivanna declared that the cut had healed and the sticking plaster could be removed altogether to let the sun and the sea water do the rest. Yurka would not mind wearing the white patch on his forehead a little longer so that everyone might see how badly wounded he was and how bravely he endured his suffering, but Yulivanna pulled the sticking plaster off and threw it away.

And life went on as before. The only difference was that Yurka became even more attached to Yulivanna and Vitaly Sergeyevich. If he could he'd follow them around the way Zhuchka followed him when he took her off her chain. For some reason he felt even more shy than before. It wasn't so bad with Vitaly Sergeyevich, but with Yulivanna it was quite hopeless. Yurka was ready to do anything in the world for her — any job of work, running errands for her, fetching and carrying, and generally laying himself out to please. But Yulivanna did not want him to work for her or lay himself out, and when she spoke to him he lost the power of speech irrevocably and completely, and stood there grinning like a fool. Yurka could feel his large mouth stretching from ear to ear, and try as he did he could not wipe that stupid grin off his face and squeeze a single word out of his throat. And so Yulivanna stopped addressing him. She said good-morning, and that was all. And he kept on grinning and waiting for her to send him on some errand or tell him what she wanted him to do. But she did not send him on any errands and did not speak to him.

Yurka discovered that Vitaly Sergeyevich could draw pictures too, and he was so good at it that Pa couldn't hold a candle to him with his geese and

fat women. Late one afternoon they went down to the beach and Vitaly Sergeyevich took his briefcase with him. They had their swim, Vitaly Sergeyevich sat down on a rock, took a sheet of thick paper from his briefcase and started scribbling something on it with a pencil. He seemed to be scribbling quite aimlessly, and suddenly there emerged from all this jumble of strokes and lines a picture of the tamarisk knoll, the fallen-in trenches around it, the awning and the tiled roof of Yurka's house. And everything was just like in real life, and yet there was a difference. Yurka got up from the rock to stand behind Vitaly Sergeyevich and look at the drawing from the other side, and his mouth fell open. The trenches and the tamarisk shrubs had vanished, and looking straight at him were the laughing eyes of Yulivanna. Yurka took two steps forward and the trenches and tamarisk shrubs were there again, he backed away and the laughing eyes looked at him once more.

"Gosh!" he gasped. "How d'you do it?"

Vitaly Sergeyevich did not hear him.

He went on scribbling and singing softly:

*Please hear my call, my lovely one,
Please hear me, dearest heart,
My shining evening star....*

Yulivanna laughed and said:

"I heard your call, and I'm off to make supper...."

And then she saw the drawing and, like Yurka, she came close to it, then backed a step, and after doing this several times, she said:

"Oh, lovely! It's so charming that I don't really know...." Her eyes were laughing as happily as on the drawing. "What is it called?"

Smiling, Vitaly Sergeyevich held the drawing out to her and said:

"It's called happiness."

"Happiness, yes...." Yulivanna took the drawing and glanced at the knoll. "I'll hang it up where I can see it every minute...." Suddenly her voice broke and rang strangely. "And remember how brief it is. A stunted happiness."

"Yulia!" Vitaly Sergeyevich said reproachfully.

"You don't want me to talk about it, that's all you want. All right, I won't.... My poor ostrich! You're still hoping that things will work out somehow by themselves. But nothing ever does...."

For some reason that Yurka could not see their gay mood was spoiled and they went home in a sulk, but once there Yulivanna became her jolly self again, and they tacked the drawing on to a piece of cardboard and

hung it up under the awning. She started making supper, and Vitaly Sergeyevich, without waiting for supper, set a bottle of Cognac on the table and had a drink and then refilled his glass again and again. Yulivanna did not scold or yell, and only glanced at him worriedly now and then. Vitaly Sergeyevich did not get fighting drunk; he merely sank deeper and deeper into thought, saying less and less. When supper was ready, Yurka went home.

For several days Yurka cudgelled his brains for something he might do to make them happy. And then he remembered Yulivanna once complaining with a laugh:

“How can it be that living on the sea shore we eat only canned fish?”

“There lived an old man and his old woman on the shore of the blue, blue sea....” Vitaly Sergeyevich said.

“Oh, no, please! I’m not an old woman and you’re not an old man, and it’s not a goldfish I want. Just an ordinary fish. Even if only a small one. Just big enough to fry and eat.”

Vitaly Sergeyevich went with Pa and Grandpa to Okunyovka, where Pa had friends among the fishermen, and they took Yurka along, but they came back empty-handed. The boats brought back nothing because the grey mullet had gone too far out, and the fishermen just passed the time of day in the barracks, reading or playing cards. They did not even go up to the look-outs, knowing that in this fresh wave the fish would not come near the shore.

Yurka suddenly remembered that conversation and, together with Slavka, they decided to catch a lot of fish—maybe not a full basket, half-full anyway—and make a gift of it to Yulivanna and Vitaly Sergeyevich. They’d come and say: “You wanted some fish, well, here you are!”

It so happened that Pa was going to visit his mother in town, and Ma went with him, afraid that if he went alone he’d drink and get into mischief, and took Lenka along.

The boys were left at home. They were their own bosses, they could go where they wanted and do what they liked, no one would scold and tell them what they’d better do.

The pillow hit Yurka on the back of his head. It was stuffed with feathers, not down, and the feathers had long become matted into a heavy lump, so if it hit you on the nose you wouldn’t think it funny. Luckily, the pillow hit him on the back of his head and Yurka played possum because this was only a preliminary bombardment after which came the attack. And, sure enough, Slavka gave the war cry:

“Charge! For Motherland!”

They fell on Yurka together—Slavka and Mitka. Yurka arched his body, shook Slavka off his back and squashed him under, then he grabbed Mitka and held him down too.

“Hände hoch!” he yelled which, Pa told them, was how the Germans said: Hands up.

When they wrestled in fun it was always an easy victory for Yurka. It wasn't quite so easy if Slavka saw red and, shaking all over, rushed blindly into attack. But they fought rarely, very rarely. Hardly ever. And never with Mitka, of course. He was only six, and just then he was only half-awake. If you left him alone he'd fall asleep at once.

Their every morning started like this—the first to wake up went into attack. But that morning they had no time for horseplay because they had to reach the cliff before daybreak.

Slavka fetched their oilcloth bag, while Yurka pulled the blanket over Mitka, head and all, and got the pitchfork they had made ready the night before. The prongs were interwoven with several rows of wire for a surer scoop and also for the crabs to have something to clutch at. Yurka had made up his mind to catch some crabs, besides fish. Vitaly Sergeyevich said that there were no edible crabs in the Black Sea, they only lived in the Far East, but Yurka and the boys had actually eaten the crabs they caught here! Numbers of times too! And so he was going to prove it.

They gave a wide berth to the knoll. Chances were that Vitaly Sergeyevich and Yulivanna were still fast asleep, but supposing Vitaly Sergeyevich was already sitting at his table, and if he saw them he'd naturally ask them where they were off to at that hour, and they would, of course, blurt it all out, and what kind of surprise was it if people knew beforehand that they were going to get it?

The path between the kitchen garden and the barley plot ended at a cart track. No one ever used this road—and who was there to trespass?—but it was ploughed up for some unknown reason. Senka-Angel did the ploughing, and when someone asked him what he was doing, he replied snappishly:

“Milking a billy-goat.”

Maybe the cart track was ploughed up to keep trespassers away from the maize field? But one side of it faced the highroad anyway, and, besides, you couldn't see the maize for the weeds which stood as high as Yurka's chest. The maize was sown here year after year, and it never grew. Because there was no water. No rains fell in summer, and the sun was scorching. Even the weeds would shrivel up in a week, and there'd be just the yellow stalks sticking from the ground.

The cart track was a short cut but the upturned clods of earth made the going hard, and so they turned straight down to the sea. On the other side of the road there was a sandy strip on which grew sparse clusters of brittle sedge, and beyond it—bare sand, rolled smooth by the waves.

But first, they went to see their nest. It really belonged to a sand piper, but since it was their find they thought of it as theirs. Every time they came this way they stopped to count the eggs in the nest and see if any nestlings had appeared. The day before there were five eggs, and now they found two eggs and three nestlings. Tiny, pitiful things. They had no feathers and were barely covered with a thin down. And their heads were so huge! Actually there was no head to speak of, just a huge open mouth and a pair of eyes. They strained their open mouths upward and squeaked.

“Let’s give them something to eat,” Slavka said.

“What? Bread? But they’re not chicks....”

“Let’s catch some flies and worms and...”

“Afterwards.”

The father sand piper was dashing about and crying shrilly a few steps away, and the moment the boys started off he ran ahead of them, hugging the ground, shaking his tail, fluttering his wings and showing in every way that he was pooped out, and catching him was the easiest thing in the world. It would be fun pretending that they were hunting him and that the bird had them fooled, and then to go back to the nest, but they decided to come back afterwards and play with him. It was easy walking on the wet sand which was as hard as a wooden floor except that the prints left by their sandalled feet filled in with water at once. The sea along the shore was like glass with never a ripple, never a splash. In fair weather it was always like this before sunrise when the breeze had gone to sleep, and the sea breeze wasn’t up yet. Yurka turned round to look at the knoll, swathed in the pink smoke of the flowering tamarisk and saw Mitka trudging behind them.

“Where d’you think you’re going?”

Mitka raised his sun-bleached eyelashes and made no answer. He never answered at once.

“Where are you off to?”

“I know where,” he replied, taking his time.

“We’re not taking you with us!”

“Don’t.” He thought for a moment, and then said: “I’ll go by myself.”

“Go home, you’re all blue from the cold!” Slavka shouted.

Still, Mitka plodded on. It was cold before sunrise, and he was bare-footed and bare-headed. He didn't own any sort of jacket yet: he didn't go to school and so Ma didn't buy him one. In spring when the rains stopped and the mud dried up in the yard, Mitka kicked off Slavka's old shoes, threw away Slavka's old cap, and went about bare-footed and bare-headed. Ma scolded him, cuffed him, and didn't let him out of doors. Mitka sat at home and cried. Very soon everyone got fed up with his crying, and he was given his freedom. That's why his eyelashes and his cropped hair became bleached white as early as April. He went about like that till late autumn, until the ground became as hard and rough as tree bark from the early morning frosts.

All Mitka had on now was a shirt and pants, and he was cold. He had goose pimples, his lips were blue, he shivered, thrust his hands as deep as they would go into his pockets, but stubbornly plodded on.

Behind the clayey cliff the sea formed a small bay and Yurka, noticing something strange on the rim of this bay, went there at a run.

A big, long body with its whitish belly up lay half-buried in the sand. From a distance the head with the open toothy mouth looked like a huge beak.

"It's a whale!" Slavka screamed.

"Nuts! Pa says we have no whales here."

"Then it's a shark. Only why did it come ashore?"

"It was washed ashore."

They squatted beside the fish and looked into its mouth. The teeth were sharp and spaced wide apart. Yurka held his hand close to its mouth. Not too close, but close enough.

"It's not a shark. A shark can bite a person in two, and this one here? It could bite off a hand maybe...."

"And a leg," Mitka said. He had squatted down behind his brothers, and, puffing busily, was also peering at the sea monster.

"*Your* leg, so you wouldn't tag behind us.... Wish we could show it to Pa, he knows all the fishes there are."

It was time to move on, but they could not tear themselves away from their find.

"I know what it is," Yurka said. "I remember now. It's called a dolphin. When we lived in Popovka there was one of them washed ashore too. The farm people carted it away because its fat is jolly curative."

"That's right, I remember," Slavka said.

"What do you remember? You were only a kid then."

"I remember anyway!" Slavka said stubbornly. His nostrils became dilated, they turned white and quivered. This was a sure sign that he was

getting mad. He always got mad when he made something up and people didn't believe him. Fighting mad. Yurka didn't want to get worked up, so he just let the matter go.

They came to another small spit behind which the sea made a small bay again, only this one was longer and shallower. That was where the crabs always crawled out of the water. Strangely, there wasn't a single one there now. Lots of prints on the sand, but not a crab.

"There's one!" Slavka yelled. "There, in the water, quite near...."

Yurka hissed at Slavka, but too late. The crab, a great big one, quickly sidled back into deep water. They walked carefully now, trying not to make a slapping sound on the sand with their sandals, and not talking. If one of them sighted a crab he told the others in a whisper and pointed with his finger.

But the crabs were no fools. They could either see or hear well from far away because at the boys' approach they crawled back from the shallows.

At last, Yurka noticed a crab just where the beach formed a ledge, and scooped it up with the pitchfork. The crab grabbed so desperately at the prongs that Yurka could hardly wrench it away.

"It's a bad kind," Slavka told him. "You can't eat it."

"Never mind. It's our first catch, let's keep it for luck."

The crab unclenched its nippers and dropped into the bag. Soon they caught a real crab, and then three more.

Mitka had been trudging behind them, and suddenly he made a sprint and when he was well ahead of them he squatted and then dropped on all fours.

"What're you running about for?" Slavka shouted at him. "You've frightened all the crabs away."

"There weren't any. Just one," Mitka called back.

"And what were you after?"

Mitka did not answer. You couldn't make him talk. If he didn't want to talk he wouldn't, he'd die first.

In calm weather you'd never say there was a rock there if you didn't know the spot well. That's because the rock was under the water and not on the shore. And the shore here was pure sand with never a pebble on it. Yet a few feet off there was this large flat rock under the water. It was large and smooth like a table top. The waves had polished it so smooth. In a swell you couldn't come near it, let alone stand on it. But when the sea was calm you could stand on it all you wanted. Around it there were lots of such flat rocks, smaller ones. Fishing for bullhead was always good here. They are such greedy fish, they grab anything you give them.

Slavka scraped out a hole in the wet sand and dug for worms. Yurka rolled up his pants and climbed on to the rock where the water didn't even come up to his knees. But they were out of luck that day. They caught three tiny bullheads and there was no more bite. They had come too late when the sun was already showing over the hill which hid Donuzlav from sight.

Still, Yurka remained where he was, putting fresh bait on the hook, casting it again and again, and cursing himself for dawdling on the road—first with the dolphin, then with the crabs. In the morning the water seemed warm and it was nice to have a dip, but if you stood in it for a solid hour you'd be frozen stiff. Yurka's lips went numb, he had gooseflesh, and a shiver run through his whole body.

"Ah, to hell with it," he said, and splashed back to the shore.

He and Slavka only missed Mitka when they had collected their tackle. They found him curled up under a low overhang, fast asleep.

"Let's leave him here," Slavka said.

"No, he'll bawl."

Yurka gave him a shove, Mitka opened his "shutters"—eyelids trimmed with bleached, fluffy eyelashes, and closed them again. He got up and walked with half-closed eyes, and it turned out to be much more fun. If you looked straight ahead the sun blinded you, but if you shut your eyes, leaving narrow slits so as not to trip, it struck at you with a pink light which had rainbow circles floating in it. Slavka tried walking like that, and then Yurka did the same. Each tried to prove to the other that he could walk with his eyes shut tight, but before they knew it Slavka was sidetracked into the water and Yurka into the dry sand. Now Yurka said that he could also walk backwards with his eyes shut tight, and all three of them tried doing it, they flopped and clowned, they were warm again and having great fun, and everything was fine except the pleasant surprise for Yulivanna and Vitaly Sergeyevich.

It was best not to show their catch to anyone, and so they turned homeward, cutting straight across the maize field. They would fry the three bullheads and eat them, one each.

Slavka left the bag beside the porch, and Maximovna's cat carried off the biggest of the bullheads. Slavka ran after the thief and even hit him with a pebble he threw, but the cat only gave a low yawl and did not let go of the fish. The yawl brought out Maximovna who started shouting at Slavka for hurting her cat, and the fish was lost for good. The other two were too small to bother with, and so the boys gave them to Zhuchka. She was hungry, and from the moment of their return had been running about the yard, rattling her chain and wagging her tail. They were hungry too. There

was only some bread in the dresser—Ma hadn't cooked anything because she was going to come home early in the morning. Yurka and Slavka each took a piece of bread and a lump of sugar, and in that very moment they heard Mitka's shout out in the yard:

"They're coming! They're coming now!"

All three ran out of the gate. You could not see the ferry from here, just the bluish arms of the cranes working there but what they did see were small columns of white dust rising at a slant from the road not so very far away. This meant that the ferry had started working, and there were cars coming. The little columns grew and swelled, changing into big columns and broad tails of dust, and there were the cars now, crawling like tiny black beetles. They became bigger and bigger and seemed to move faster as they approached. A tip-up lorry rumbled past first, behind it sped a bouncing empty lorry, then another tip-up lorry, then long, heavy trucks with trailers.... Roaring and rumbling, bouncing and clattering, stinking of petrol and grease, the cars raced past. The road was safer here—the estuary swamp did not come up so close, there was the earth road on the left of the highroad, and the cars kept overtaking one another, angrily honking their horns to make the slowcoaches get a move on, and there was no telling if they were chasing something and couldn't catch up, or if they were being chased by something and were afraid they couldn't get away, and on they raced, faster and faster....

A blue and white bus came into sight. Yurka had once travelled in one. It was very pretty inside with all the metal things shining, and the seats were so soft that it didn't hurt you no matter how you were jolted. It was best to sit up front—you could see the road and look at the driver sitting in his glass cab and turning his great big wheel; or at the back, because you were bounced better there....

The bus came round the bend and gathered speed on the straight run. The boys ran to the side of the road, but the bus didn't even slow down; it sprayed them with the pebbles it kicked up with its wheels, and flew on. Ma and Pa weren't on it. And the next bus wasn't due until 1 a.m.

They went home to cook the crabs. The crabs were still moving, but once dropped into the boiling water they stopped moving and changed colour from greyish green to white and red. They were a disappointment, probably because Slavka forgot to salt the water. And anyway what was there to eat in them, just the pincers. Pa used to say that crayfish had a tail and there was a lot to eat there, but crabs had no tail, just their pincers and legs. Try biting them open too, they were as hard as iron....

Zhuchka was still running about the yard and rattling her chain—she was hungry. Slavka threw her a piece of bread, she caught it in the air and gulped it down without chewing. She'd eat the whole loaf if they gave it to her. But what were they going to eat if Ma didn't come home soon? Yurka mixed some barley with water for her, and Zhuchka gobbled it all up, licked her bowl clean, and went into her sandstone kennel. The sun was already very hot, and Zhuchka had a black shaggy coat.

They couldn't think of what to do next, and here Mitka had a brainwave: "Let's catch tarantulas!"

There were lots of tarantula holes on the knoll round the tent. Yulivanna had never seen a tarantula and was terribly afraid of them, so the boys had promised to catch them all out. Yurka rolled a bit of tar into a thin sausage, stuck on a length of thread, and off they went to the knoll. Yulivanna was already up and making breakfast. Vitaly Sergeyevich was quick to guess the purpose of their visit.

"Ah, the tarantula fighters! Well, well, let's see how it's done."

The boys crouched over the nearest hole. It was a big, smooth hole, and it went straight down as though a round stick had been driven into the ground and then pulled out.

"He's sitting there and waiting for something to fall down, and when it does he'll snap at it and eat it," Slavka said.

Yurka lowered the tar-sausage into the hole, gave the thread a few slight pulls, and then a sharp jerk. There was no tarantula on the tar-sausage. Yurka sniffed it and made a face.

"Good! I felt it grab, and here's its stink!"

Everyone, including Vitaly Sergeyevich, had a sniff to see how the tar-sausage smelt of tarantula.

"Yulivanna, d'you want a sniff?" Yurka asked.

"Heavens, Yura, why should I want to sniff that horrible stuff!" Yulivanna said in a tone of reproof.

Yurka grinned but found nothing to say. He had offered her a sniff because he thought she'd be interested. He spat on the tar—it was done that way, they lowered it into the hole again, gave the thread a few pulls, and with a jerk pulled it out together with a tarantula. It was a dirty-yellow colour, a huge, hairy spider, bigger than a five-kopek coin. The tarantula let go of the tar, dropped on the ground and immediately reared up on its hind legs and raised its front ones.

"Look out! It's going to pounce!" Slavka shouted.

Everyone sprang back.

Yurka stepped on the spider and squashed it. There was a horrible stench.

“Not a very nice creature,” Vitaly Sergeyevich said. “But even he must have seemed lovable to his mother.”

They caught four more and closed up their holes. They spent a long time trying to entice the fifth one out of its hole, but that one was a cunning fellow, grabbing the tar and letting it go at the first pull.

“Enough, Vitaly.” Yulivanna said. “Come and eat.”

“Let’s invite the brave hunters to the feast too.”

“No, we don’t want to eat,” Yurka said. “We’ve eaten already. Come on, let’s go.”

Mitka who had been watching the hunt with his eyes half-closed, suddenly opened them wide and said:

“They don’t snore at all.”

“Who doesn’t?”

“Crabs don’t.”

Everyone burst out laughing. The day before Mitka had asked Vitaly Sergeyevich something and had been told that he’d know everything when he heard how crabs snored. Yurka and Slavka got the joke, of course, because how could crabs snore?—but Mitka thought Vitaly Sergeyevich meant it seriously.

“Did you listen?”

“This morning. We also found a dolphin. A dead one.”

“Oh, Uncle Vitya, I clean forgot,” Yurka said. “D’you want medicine? Dolphins have such curative fat that it cures anything. In Popovka they melted it down and when someone fell ill they rubbed him with it. It cures everyone. Sheep too, and cows. Let’s go and get some of that fat, all right?” Yurka beamed, relishing the thought of the really good deed they were going to do.

“Now what do I want that medicine for?” Vitaly Sergeyevich asked.

“But you told us yourself that Yulivanna was not well.... Maybe it will cure her....”

“Yura!” Yulivanna said sternly. “You must really mind what you say. After all, I’m not a sheep or a cow....”

Slavka grinned, but pulled a straight face at once because Yulivanna was angry and Uncle Vitya was silent, which meant that he was also annoyed, and things didn’t look good at all. Yurka saw it too. Things were very bad, in fact, but he hadn’t meant it that way, he meant to do something good for them. He was tongue-tied again, he stood there for a minute not knowing what to say, then turned on his heel and went home, with Slavka and Mitka trotting behind.

Slavka tried calling him a “cow doctor”, just to tease, but he got a cuff on his ear the very first time and though he was spoiling for a fight, Yurka was

not having any. He felt so ashamed he didn't know what to do, how to make up for his stupidity, and suddenly he remembered that they hadn't touched the largest of the boiled crabs. He'd go and give it to them, and they'd stop being angry with him. He snatched up the crab and ran to the tamarisk shrubs.

The sun-scorched grass on the edges of the knoll was dry already, but where the bushes offered a bit of shade, thin though it was, the grass was still green and muffled the sound of footsteps. Yulivanna and Vitaly Sergeyevich sat with their backs to Yurka and did not hear him approach. He had about three steps to go to their table when Yulivanna said:

"Aren't you tired of your gang yet?"

"Not at all, they're nice boys," replied Vitaly Sergeyevich.

"I don't know.... The little one is at least cute, but that Yurka! I think he's simply a cretin. That everlasting grin of his is idiotic enough.... However, what could you expect with a heredity like his. The father a drunkard...."

She turned her head, saw Yurka and blushed.

"Eavesdropping is nasty, and you ought to be ashamed of yourself!" she said.

Vitaly Sergeyevich looked over his shoulder, saw Yurka and turned slowly red. He always kept out of the sun, he wasn't tanned, and so his spreading flush was there for all to see—first his cheeks, then his temples, and then his ears.

Yurka had begun to smile on his way here, imagining how surprised and pleased they'd be when he gave them the crab, in spite of himself he went on smiling as he watched Vitaly Sergeyevich's mounting flush, feeling that he was turning red himself.

"What is it, Yura?" Vitaly Sergeyevich asked in a constrained voice.

"Here," Yurka said, holding out the crab.

They were both as red as the crab, and the worst thing of all was that Yurka realised that smiling was stupid, there was nothing to smile about, but he couldn't help it and went on grinning.

"Oh, a nice treat.... Thanks."

Yurka turned and, feeling as though his back and legs were made of wood, started back home.

He heard Vitaly Sergeyevich saying:

"Oh, Yulia, did you have to?"

"I didn't say it for him to hear. And anyway he didn't understand anything."

"He understood everything."

6



Yurka did not understand everything. He did not know the thing which Yulivanna called him, but guessed that it was something very mean to make Vitaly Sergeyevich turn so red.

"They can go and jump in the lake for all I care," Yurka said to himself.

He believed that if he said this everything would be forgotten and things would go as before. It happened many times before in school and at home, too. But this time it didn't work. He tried not to think about what had happened, but the more he tried the more the thought preyed on his mind, and no matter what he was doing, he could not get rid of the bruising sense of awkwardness and unpleasantness which had this clamping effect on him. Couldn't she have simply yelled at him, cursed and called him names? Any kind of names. Yurka was often cursed and scolded. In school it was the teacher who did it, at home it was Ma, or Pa, or Maximovna, or Grandpa. No, not Grandpa, he was kind, he never scolded. All he said was: "What d'you think you're doing, eh?"—and that was all. And even if he were to scold, what of it? Yurka couldn't give a hang, he was used to it. Your colours wouldn't run and a piece of you wouldn't drop away from scolding....

The awkwardness and being clamped down like this became unbearable. His hands and legs felt different, his whole body felt not his own and so stiff that he was sure he couldn't do anything now, not even the things he did so easily before. He tried to think up some heroics that would "show everyone" and challenged Slavka to a climb on to the barn roof and a walk along the ridge. Slavka funkcd, but Yurka went ahead. It was a tiled hip-roof. Bare-footed he might make it, but in a fit of anger and recklessness he said: "There's nothing to it if you're bare-footed. I'll do it

in my sandals.” He was frightened when he got to the ridge because it was so high and his sandals had no grip, but he stood up straight and walked. He got to almost the end of the ridge, and here he slipped, fell on the slope of the roof and rolled down. Manure had been heaped up beside the barn, so he landed on this and did not hurt himself badly, just scratches all over him and a drenching in the manure, which made him all the more furious and reckless. He’d love a fight, if there was anyone to fight with. He couldn’t beat up Slavka or Mitka, could he, when they weren’t to blame for anything?

And here Mitka came running and howling at the top of his voice. He was choking with tears and snot. On the way back from the water well Grandpa had stumbled upon “their” nest, taken all the baby birds and thrown them to his cat, who was gobbling them up at this very minute.... Yurka picked up a stone and ran to the yard. The cat had already eaten the last of the nestlings and was sitting in the sun, licking its nose and cheeks. Grandpa stood beside him, lighting a cigarette.

“Why did you give the nestlings to the cat?” Yurka screamed.

“Why not, a cat’s got to eat too,” Grandpa replied, screwing up his eyes affectionately.

“Eat nestlings?”

“What’s the loss? There’s a lot of them.”

Yurka hurled the stone at the cat with all his might, but missed.

“Hey, what are you doing?” Grandpa shouted.

“And you, what are *you* doing? Oh, you!”

Yurka picked up another stone. Next thing he would have flung it at Grandpa, right into his kindly, wrinkled face.... But he didn’t, he rushed out of the yard and threw the stone at a milepost which had a tin sign with the figure 40 on it. The tin bent. Yurka picked up another stone and threw, and he went on picking up stones and hitting the tin sign until it was twisted round the pole and was all in pockmarks.

He glanced about him, looking for something else to smash, to break, to destroy, but there was nothing there except the white-washed fence, the white-washed blank wall of the house, the dusty and ruddy limestone road, and the telegraph wires overhead, whining from the wind. Yurka aimed a stone at the insulator and hit it, but the insulator did not break, so he picked up another stone but at that moment Grandpa came out of the gate and shouted at him, and Yurka ran away from the milepost, from his home, to the Donuzlav.

Sweltering heat and silence hung over the estuary. And flies. Those special estuary flies with a mean bite. They pounced on Yurka the moment he sat down on the bank. They bit him through his shirt, even through his

pants, and through the slits in his sandals. Yurka slapped himself fiercely, but the flies always got away. Where did they come from, Yurka wondered, and what did they live on, the swarming millions of them? If they were bloodsuckers, they fed on blood, but there were no animals or people here, just the ducks in the poultry-yard, but they couldn't bite a duck, could they? Yurka glanced in the direction of the poultry-yard and saw a lorry driving up and a crowd gathered there. Waving off the pestersome flies, he went there. To have a look.

All the ducks had been driven into a small enclosure in the yard. The poultry women grabbed them, shoved them into cage-like boxes, and loaded them into the lorry. The ducks screamed as if their throats were being cut, and the women screeched curses. Senka-Angel was sitting in the narrow strip of shade cast by the poultry house and taking swats at the flies. Yurka went up to him.

"Hi."

"Ah, it's you, soldier? Hello."

"What's going on?"

"We're evacuating the ducks. To farm number 2."

"But there's no pond or anything there!"

"But there's a farm manager. And he means more to the ducks."

"Go on with you, you're always making fun."

"This isn't fun."

A huge drake got away from a poultry woman, gave a heart-rending quack, and took flight, but his feeble wings could not hold his heavy body, and he flopped on the ground. Yurka made a dash and caught him.

"Attaboy, come on, help us," said the poultry woman.

And help Yurka did. He caught the screaming ducks and brought them to the woman who shoved them into the cage. When the lorry was fully loaded Senka-Angel said:

"Get in, I'll give you a ride, you've earned it."

Yurka climbed into the cab and sat close to Senka.

He felt at home here, more at ease than in the Volga, but still the lorry was a far cry from the Volga, it jolted and shook you up like nobody's business....

Senka drove on to the highroad carefully, and immediately there was a honking of horns behind him, the cars coming from the ferry urging him on. Senka swung to the right as far as he could go, but still they honked and honked at him, and as the other lorries overtook him, they sprayed him with dust and honked again at the vehicles in front, overtaking them, in their turn.

"What's the chase for?" Yurka asked.

"For money," Senka-Angel replied.

Yurka gave him a puzzled look.

"Oh well, you know, so much per ton-kilometre.... The greater your mileage the richer your silage, as we say. That's why they go all out."

Senka said it so bitterly, and it was so unlike him, that Yurka looked at him in puzzlement again, but Senka did not explain.

At Poultry Farm No.2 they unloaded the cages and went back for more. But Yurka did not go as far as the poultry-yard, he wanted to eat and so he got off at his house. Slavka and Mitka were hungry too and were munching bread. It was past 12, and the boys went out into the road again to meet Ma and Pa. This time the bus did stop, but the only passenger to get off was a woman with a lot of bundles, and she started up the slope to where the collective farm shepherd lived. A trudge of three kilometres or so.

Slavka was moping and Mitka was on the verge of tears. Yurka gave them another piece of bread and two lumps of sugar each. They ate the bread, drank some water, but strangely they still felt hungry. And suddenly Vitaly Sergeyevich walked in. He never came into their room before for all of Pa's inviting, and here he simply walked in, looked about the room and sat down on a chair.

"How's life, citizens?" he asked.

Yurka was sitting on his bed in the corner. He had already forgotten what happened early that morning, but now it all came back in a flash and he sat there looking sullenly at Vitaly Sergeyevich.

"Could be worse," Slavka replied.

"And what did you have to eat today?" Vitaly Sergeyevich wanted to know.

Slavka shrugged, looked at Yurka for prompting, but his elder brother did not even stir.

"Bread," Slavka said, and added: "With sugar."

"Not too little? Perhaps you'll come with me and have lunch?"

"Why should we?" Yurka said. "We can get by...."

"And do what?"

Yurka made no answer. He did not know what to say. He did not want to go to their place. Not for anything in the world.

"I see," Vitaly Sergeyevich said. "You can get by without womenfolk. Then take me into your male company. All right?"

Slavka was smiling, Mitka was opening and closing his "shutters", and Yurka kept a sulky silence.

"Seeing that we're all men here, shall we make a pot of soldier's soup?"

"And what's soldier's soup?" Slavka asked.

"It's famous. It's made from whatever you have in the house. There was

one soldier who actually made it from an axe. But we're not going to make ours from an axe...."

Mitka gave a peal of laughter, and Yurka asked:

"Were you in the war?"

"No, I wasn't," Vitaly Sergeyevich replied. "A soldier friend told me how to make it.... Well then, are we or aren't we?"

"From what?" Slavka asked.

"Any potatoes in the house? Good. Carrots? Excellent. Onions? Marvellous. And, the main thing, salt? Fine. Any groats? Oh, millet? Couldn't be better! Well, dear citizens, it's all got to be washed and peeled.... Shall we get down to it?"

And they did. At first, Yurka did not want to take part, but then he reasoned that they were going to do it for themselves, not for anyone else, and, after all, why should they go hungry? Slavka was washing the millet and peeling the potatoes, Mitka started peeling an onion and it made him cry, so Vitaly Sergeyevich finished the job for him and sliced it too, while Yurka added kerosene to the stove and lit it. They had gone over to the barn where Ma always did the cooking in summer. It was dirty and sooty in the barn, but they all sat down on whatever they could find and talked about all kinds of things as they watched the water in the tall saucepan coming to a boil. Slavka, Mitka and Vitaly Sergeyevich did the talking, while Yurka spoke not a word. A bit later Vitaly Sergeyevich took a tin out of his bulging pocket, opened it and emptied it into the saucepan. The wonderful smell rising from it made their mouths water. When the soup was ready, the boys grabbed their bowls, but they turned out to be dirty. They washed them, even scoured them with sand, and then Vitaly Sergeyevich ladled out the "soldier's soup". They had never eaten anything to beat this.... Each had a brimming bowl, and then a second helping of half a bowl although their tummies had hardly room for it....

"Like it?" Vitaly Sergeyevich asked.

Slavka stuck up a thumb and said: "Yummy!"

"Good. Take the bowls then and scour them to a high gleam."

Slavka and Mitka collected the bowls and spoons and went off to wash them.

When they were gone, Yurka who still wore his sullen look, asked:

"What is a kratin?"

"A cretin?"

Vitaly Sergeyevich's ears turned red again, he rubbed his chin furiously, bent close to Yurka, breathing alcohol on him, and said:

"A word is a dangerous thing, Yura," he said. "You can easily wound a person with it, even kill him. Figuratively speaking, of course. Yulia

Ivanovna did not want to hurt your feelings. Not at all. The word she used simply means 'backward'. And it is true, you know! You've been kept for a second year in the third form and if you don't pull up your socks you'll stay there for a third year...."

"Is it my fault that I was sick?" Yurka demanded.

"I'm not blaming you. I am just stating facts. And books you never read either. Why, I wonder?"

"Ugh, I don't like them," Yurka dismissed the suggestion with a gesture. "Why read them anyway? Pa's got some, but they're no fun...."

"You must be too young for them. You should get other books. Is there a library in your school?"

"Sure."

"Then it simply means that you're not interested, you haven't acquired the habit. It's a great pity, you know. What are you planning to be?"

Yurka shrugged. He didn't know. He'd like to take a try at everything.

"I hardly think you'd want to go about with a shovel, patching the road like your father and mother."

Yurka tossed his head in negation.

"What do you want to be then? A car driver, a sailor, a flier? Maybe even a cosmonaut?"

Yurka giggled.

"Every skill takes learning. And that's not enough. You've got to be an educated person. And you can't become educated unless you read books. No school or university can do it for you. A person can finish a university and remain an ignoramus. And it does happen quite often...."

"I want to go to boarding school," Yurka said.

"D'you think it's easier there than in day school? There, too, you have to study hard. And a boy as backward as you wouldn't be admitted anyway. So you simply have to pull up your socks first.... No, my dear boy, there's no escaping one's duty," Vitaly Sergeyevich said and fell silent, occupied with his own thoughts, and then he looked at Yurka again and continued: "There it is. You must pull yourself together and make an effort. D'you think you're so inferior to the others that you can't? I'm sure you can."

Yurka smiled self-consciously.

"And don't be angry with Yulia Ivanovna, she did not mean it."

"Why, I... I didn't say anything...."

"Then collect the gang and let's go down to the beach, we all want to freshen ourselves up before bedtime."

They went down to the beach and Yulivanna came too, and everything was back to normal—they swam, fooled about, and were happier than ever. Slavka and Mitka fell asleep at once, but Yurka stayed awake for a

long time, thinking. The way he saw it, he shouldn't have taken offence. What was he making such a fuss about anyway? Was he backward? He was. He didn't pass on to the next form? He didn't. Was it a fact? It was. And why? Because he didn't want to learn the multiplication table. To spite the teacher. Because she was always picking at him. But it was no skin off her nose. It's he and not she who was kept back in the third form. Slavka had caught up with him, he was going to be in the third form too. And everyone would take digs at Yurka for being so dumb and going to the same form with his younger brother. At this rate, Lenka would catch up soon, if he didn't look out. And was he so dumb? Was he such poor stuff compared with the rest? Why, he'd learn that multiplication by heart the very next day if he wanted....

Before he had thought all these things out and fallen asleep, Ma, Pa and Lenka arrived. They brought loaves of white bread and sausage, thinking that the boys had gone hungry all day. Yurka got up and fetched what remained of the "soldier's soup", Ma heated it up, they all had some and couldn't praise it enough. In the morning Ma ran off to Yulivanna, and Yurka could hear her yelling for all the world to hear how they got stuck in town and only reached home in the middle of the night, getting a lift in a lorry going this way, and how obliged she was to Yulivanna and Vitaly Sergeyevich for feeding the kids, and what good people they were, you could see right away that they were....

Yurka and Slavka ran to the poultry-yard, thinking that not all the ducks had been evacuated yet and they'd ride in the lorry with Senka-Angel to the other farm, but they found the place empty and all the doors and windows boarded up with the planks nailed down criss-cross.

And then came the storm. It sneaked up without anyone noticing. First, whitecaps appeared at the very horizon, the sea turned dark there, and along the shore it paled to a light-green. But this had happened many times before—after midday the sea breeze always blew harder, the wash of the sea was louder, and so no one took any notice. The sky remained unclouded, the sun beat down for all it was worth, everyone who could crept into the shade, and there was no special wind even. The wind blew as usual, but, strangely, it brought no coolness with it. And then it dropped altogether, but the whitecaps rose higher and higher, they now looked like long, shaggy manes, and in the distance the sea became darker and darker. Pa came out of the workshop, took a look at the sea, shook his head but did not say anything. Yurka had brought his bicycle out into the yard and started taking off the front wheel because Senka-Angel might really give him his as he had no use for it, when suddenly his breath caught. He opened his mouth and sprang up. A violent gust of wind hit the yard, swept



up and carried away the garbage and chicken feathers, pressed the tamarisk shrubs to the ground, flattened the barley behind the knoll, swelled out the canvas awning like a parachute till it burst and streamed like a torn flag. Yurka rushed there.

Vitaly Sergeyevich was trying to undo the knots, but the wind had tightened them and tore at the canvas which whipped the car with sharp slapping sounds. Vitaly Sergeyevich got a knife and cut first one rope then another. The canvas struggled free of his hold like a living thing, Yurka clutched at one end and received a stinging blow. Yulivanna also grabbed hold of the canvas. Vitaly Sergeyevich cut all the straps, the three of them got the better of the furiously struggling canvas, wrapped it round the car and strapped it securely. The tent seemed safe enough, but Vitaly Sergeyevich drove the metal pegs deeper into the ground, just in case. No sooner had they finished than the wind died down. And all at once the heat became so sweltering that Yurka's sweat-drenched shirt stuck to his body.

"What a waste of effort," Yulivanna said, fanning herself with a book. "We'll have to put the awning all over again now."

"I don't think so," said Vitaly Sergeyevich. "Look."

There was a line of white seething foam along the beach, behind the breakers came an ever widening strip of bright green water, and behind that, in the black depths, white-crested waves reared up, dropped, and raced towards the shore. And here Yurka saw that another blast of wind was coming. The waves made a high fling, tatters of foam flew in the air, the dust from the dirt road stood up in an eerie wall, the barley hugged the ground, and the wind took a swipe at the knoll. Yurka turned his back to the wind because he couldn't breathe. Yulivanna turned too, bending over to hold down her skirt, and the white kerchief she wore on her hair flew up and away like a tumbler-dove. The tamarisk shrubs bent low, and the ripped-off flowers flew in a pink cloud after Yulivanna's kerchief.

She had stuffed her skirt between her knees and with both hands was holding down her flying, tousled hair.

"What is it, the end of the world?" she shouted, laughing, and trying to make herself heard against the whistling of the wind.

"It's the beginning of the end," Vitaly Sergeyevich laughed too. His hair stood up on end and made a silver halo round the front of his head.

The blast of wind passed.

"Phew! In another minute I'd be blown away too," Yulivanna draw a sigh of relief. "Is it over, or will there be more?"

"It's only the prelude," Vitaly Sergeyevich said.

"Then let's stretch ropes the way they do on ships to hold on to, or tie ourselves to the masts.... Only what could we use for masts? Not these little

shrubs. The wind would uproot them and carry them away with us tied to them....”

They laughed and joked as they collected things that the wind might blow away and put them in the tent or the car. The camp looked stripped and sad.

“Anything else?” Yulivanna said. “Oh yes, the most important thing to save, our ‘Happiness’....”

She took down Vitaly Sergeyevich’s picture and put it away in the tent.

“We’ve taken precautions against the elements, but what about dinner? One can’t cook anything in this wind,” Yulivanna said.

“Can’t we do without soup?” Vitaly Sergeyevich asked.

“Certainly not! I can, but it’s bad for you,” Yulivanna said resolutely. “I’ll go hat in hand to Maximovna and beg her to let me into kitchen. True, it’s full of flies and kerosene stench, but I’ll endure these trials somehow.... What won’t one do in the name of love.... No sacrifice is great enough, and so on and so forth.”

Chattering gaily, Yulivanna began to pack a bag, but the wind started up again and she clutched at her skirt with both hands.

“Change into slacks,” Vitaly Sergeyevich suggested.

“I can’t go there in slacks. They don’t say anything, but they disapprove.

“Let me carry the bag for you,” Yurka said.

He carried the bag, and Yulivanna struggled with her skirt all the way to the house.

Maximovna was glad to see her.

“Oh, how nice!” she cooed. “We’ll be nice and cosy here, cooking our dinner together. We never get a chance to have a good, long talk, always on the run as we are, never sitting down for a chat, nice and cosy....”

Yurka went back to Vitaly Sergeyevich.

The wind did not blow in gusts now, but came in a solid wall, pushing you in the face and chest. Yurka had to bend over a bit to make walking easier. Vitaly Sergeyevich sat at the table, watching the sea. A bottle, already drunk from, and a plastic cup stood on the table before him.

“Beautiful, eh?” Vitaly Sergeyevich said, and answered himself: “Beautiful!”

“When it’s over, shall we go and collect pumice?” Yurka said. “There are lots on the beach after a storm.”

“Collect pumice? Certainly. Only why pumice? What if the sea casts some wonder ashore? Say, a copper-bound chest made somewhere in Amsterdam or Valparaiso? And in it a pirate’s map showing where he’d buried his treasure.... Or maybe the chest will be simply bursting with ducats, florins and thalers with the image of that plump little lady, Maria

Theresa on them. Can you image it, a chest bursting with money? And what shall we do with it?" Yurka shrugged. "What do people do with money? Spend it. And you and I are going to spend it too. We'll go travelling, just following our nose, to the end of the world, for instance. All right?"

Yurka laughed. Vitaly Sergeyevich took a draft and filled up his plastic cup.

"Ah, to go to the end of the world.... To the dreamland land of children and grown-up fools.... What about Yulivanna, as you call her, shall we take her along?" Yurka was enjoying the game, and nodded readily in smiling affirmation. "That's right, she'll do, with her you can go to the end of the world.... But supposing it's not a chest? Supposing it's a bottle? A bottle covered with seaweed and cockle-shells, and a note with an SOS in it. Do you know what SOS means? Save Our Souls.... People invented it when they still believed a soul could be saved.... You can save someone's body, someone's life, but when they try to save your soul.... We're not going to go nosing in anyone's soul, we've had a taste of others doing it to ours."

"Vitaly! Now what do you think you're doing? With your heart, in this heat, in the sun...."

The wind had drowned out her footfall, and she had suddenly appeared at the table and snatched up the bottle.

"Don't be angry, darling, I've also decided to steel myself."

"This way?"

"Any way. The ostrich has stopped burying its head in the sand."

"You never tried to hide from *this*."

"I won't hide from anything any more. You'll see."

"Has something happened?"

"Nothing. It's simply that I have ripened. Like a late vegetable. I don't know what vegetable exactly, celery perhaps or lettuce...."

"They're the early ones, incidentally."

"Well, it doesn't matter. Don't be angry, darling. Not another drop without your permission."

"Promise?"

Vitaly Sergeyevich held up two crossed fingers. Yulivanna was never angry for long, and, laughing, she ruffled Vitaly Sergeyevich's wind-tousled hair.

"My, if you had fallen into my clutches earlier I'd have taken you in hand...."

"And shown me. How did it go at the kitchen?"

"Complete contact as usual and a stream of honeyed outpourings. And the soup is simmering."

"What about going down to the sea?"

They started down, and Yurka came with them. Slavka and Mitka saw them heading for the beach, and followed at a run.

"It's beautiful!" Vitaly Sergeyevich said again, but this time he had to shout.

The seething waves reared up before them as tall as Yurka and crashed down with a roar, spreading over the sand. The bright green strip of water had retreated, and behind it, in the black depths, the white-crested waves rose up and raced towards the shore. To the left of them, where there was a sand bar, the waves curled back sooner, foamed and crashed. Where they stood, the billows came straight on, swelling and towering, their foaming crests were ripped away by the wind, and then the wall of water crashed down on the sand with a great roar, only to seethe again and rush back, but the next mountainous wave was already upon it, picking up the first one on the ebb and crashing down with it.

"No, I don't like it," Yulivanna said, looking into the black, seething distance. "I always think of those who are out there...."

"Oh, that's not a real storm, it's a light breeze, no more.... Anyone game for a swim?"

"You're out of your mind!"

"Not at all. Come on, you coward, I'll show you how."

Vitaly Sergeyevich stripped down to his trunks and Yulivanna took off her dress under which she wore a bathing suit. He took her by the hand and they went right up to the towering wall of water and turned their backs to it. The wave hit them and sprayed them with foam. Vitaly Sergeyevich jumped and landed on his feet, but Yulivanna would have been knocked down if he hadn't held her.

When the next wave came they both jumped and both kept their feet. The great mass of water ran between their legs and only the crest broke over them. They stood and jumped, Yulivanna liked it now and, laughing, tried to jump as high as possible. Yurka began to pull off his shirt.

"Coming?" he called out to Slavka.

"Aw nuts, I don't want to be knocked down," Slavka said.

Yurka took off his trousers and sandals and went into the water.

"Brave chap!" Vitaly Sergeyevich shouted. "Here, give me your hand."

He gripped Yurka's hand tight and just in time, because Yurka hadn't been quick enough to jump and the oncoming wave went over his head. When Vitaly Sergeyevich pulled him out by the hand, he was blinded and gasping for breath. He kept his wits about him the next time and jumped, the water raced past between his legs and he didn't lose his balance.

The three of them stood with their backs to the waves and jumped. More and more waves came on, hitting them from behind, but they were smarter



and quicker, and every time they landed on their feet. It was frightening and exciting, and Slavka watched them with envy, and Mitka—with fear. When they'd had enough they went and sat down on the sandstone rock. Yulivanna and Yurka got dressed, but Vitaly Sergeyevich was still in his trunks.

"What about you?" Yulivanna asked him.

"I'll go and have a real swim now," he said. "This was child's play."

"You're not going! You've had enough."

"Don't worry," Vitaly Sergeyevich said. "Haven't I done it before?"

He went in, and stopped not far from the shore, waiting. The waves came on one after another, but still he waited, and when the tallest wave reared in front of him he made a dash and dived into it. The wave crashed down on the sand, but Vitaly Sergeyevich was well behind it already. The crest of the next wave reared over him, he dived again, and his head came up much farther out at sea.

"Gosh, that's really something! I'll learn to do that too!" Slavka said.

"A poor fish like you," Yurka said, "you were scared to go in at all."

Yulivanna called out, but the wind carried her voice away and squashed it, and now she waved her arms to tell Vitaly Sergeyevich that he must come back. He smiled, gave her a reassuring wave, and started swimming shorewards. Four waves with deep pits between them separated him from the shore. Yurka watched him with his heart in his mouth, dying to learn to swim like that too. Vitaly Sergeyevich was taking his time, he stayed where he was, glancing over his shoulder and waiting for the next wave, and when it came he swam with quick, powerful strokes, was picked up on the crest and carried forward. But the wave went on ahead, and he remained behind it, waiting for the next one. It picked him up and carried him, he opened his mouth and shouted something, raised his arm, and disappeared under the water.

Yurka jumped to his feet the better to see where he would come up. The wave crashed with a roar. The next one came right behind it, and crashed too. He hadn't come up. Then a third wave broke, and he still wasn't there. He was not there.

"A-a-a-a...."

The piercing scream drowned the howl of the wind, and the roar of the waves hit Yurka's eardrums. Yulivanna, clutching her head in her hands, was staring with wide-open eyes at the spot where he ought to be and where *he was not*.

She started running, tripped and fell, but immediately picked herself up and ran on *towards him*.... Yurka ran after her. The foaming billow knocked her down lifted up her skirt, and with a roaring and squelching

started rolling her, dragging her back with it. Yurka grabbed her hand and clutched at the hem of her skirt. A new wave broke before them. Yurka fell on his knees, but he did not let go of her hand and her dress, and when the roaring wave began to recede, he dragged her aside, up the beach. But he did not have the strength to pull her away, he could only keep his clutch on her, pushing his heels hard into the trickling sand. A new wave sprayed them. Yulivanna scrambled up on all fours, then she straightened up and with eyes wide with horror searched the waves, the foaming crests, the roaring billows.

He was not there.

A piercing scream again stabbed Yurka's eardrums.

Yurka twitched and shivered all over. He clutched at Yulivanna's dress and, gasping, said over and over again:

"Yulivanna ... don't.... Yulivanna, don't...."

Without realising what she was doing she was convulsively squeezing his face, chest and shoulders, repeating:

"Oh, my God, what's happened.... Oh, my God, what's happened...."

Suddenly, she turned round and screamed:

"Hurry! Run for help! Hurry!"

Slavka ran home. And Mitka, squatting on the sand, huddled against the sandstone rock and howled.

Blood was trickling down Yulivanna's bruised knees, her dress was torn, and a black-and-blue swelling was rising on one cheek. She did not notice anything and went on staring with the same stark look in her eyes at the place where he was last. The waves came on, one after the other, their crests looked vividly green in the sun, they seethed with foam and crashed with a roar.



7

Fyodor, the youngest and strongest of them all, came running first, followed by Nyushka and Ma, then Grandpa with a long rope, then Pa, and after him waddled old Maximovna, carrying her flabby fat with difficulty.

From a long way away she started flapping her arms like a hen flaps her wings and wailing:

“What a disaster ... what a disaster ... what a disaster....”

Ma and Maximovna hurried to Yulivanna and began to keen each her own lament:

“Oh, the grief.... How did it happen?... Oh, the grief!... Why did he do it?”

Yulivanna did not hear them, she was staring fixedly at the spot where he did not come up. Everyone stood looking at the waves of green water, coming one on top of the other, as if expecting Vitaly Sergeyevich to bob up and swim to the shore.

“Not much chance now,” Grandpa said.

Fyodor bent down and started pulling off his shirt.

“What do you want to do?” Nyushka rushed to him in alarm.

“Leave me alone,” he said through clenched teeth, stripping down to his black, knee-length shorts.

“Tie a rope round you, you hear?” Pa told him.

Fyodor took the rope from Grandpa, wound it round his body and started knotting it. Pa, fussing around him, was telling him how to dive into the wave, how to take his chance afterwards and swim back with the wave. Fyodor couldn’t get the knot right, and in exasperation he snapped at Pa:

“Shut your bloody mouth! If you know such a lot about it, go in yourself.”

Pa pursed his lips, and said nothing.

Fyodor took a run, dived into a wave, but it turned him over backwards and flung him down on the sand.

“Fyodor!” Nyushka screamed.

She ran to Fyodor, but he got up without her help, swore at her, tossed back his hair, crouched for the run and dived again.

“Oh Lord in heaven, oh Lord in heaven, oh Lord in heaven...” Nyushka said over and over again. She did not believe in God, she never prayed, and here she suddenly turned to God in her fear that Fyodor might drown.

Fyodor was already behind the third wave. He swam about a bit, searching the water about him, and dived. He did not come up for a long time, and Nyushka’s lips turned quite white, Pa began to fuss, and Grandpa made ready to pull in the rope he was holding, but at that moment Fyodor came up, spitting and gulping air with a wide-open mouth. When he had got his breath back, he dived again and came up safely.

He dived again and again, now showing his black shorts, now his head, streaming with water and with his hair plastered over his face, and finally



he signalled with his hand and Grandpa started pulling in the rope, rapidly changing hands. Fyodor had almost reached the shore when a wave, he wasn't quick enough to dodge, overtook him, set him up on all fours, and dragged him back into the sea for all his desperate clutching at the sand. Pa also tugged at the rope with Grandpa, and together they managed to pull Fyodor out of the seething water. He scrambled up the beach and sat down.

"The sea's all ploughed up.... Sea-nettle and sand.... Can't see a thing...."

"That's what I said!" Pa chimed in. "The wave drags everything back into the sea just now. I can imagine how far the sea's dragged him now...."

"That's for sure." Grandpa said. "You won't find him for anything before the sea calms down.... But even then, I don't know...."



Everyone looked at Yulivanna, but she hadn't heard anything and continued to stare at the raging, tousled billows of green water.

"Oh Lord in heaven!" Nyushka said in a small voice and burst into tears. She cried because there was no more hope and she was sorry for Vitaly Sergeyevich, or maybe because she had been afraid that Fyodor would be drowned too, and now that he was safe all her fear was pouring out in tears.

Ma was sobbing quietly, Maximovna kept wiping her eyes with the corner of her shawl and crooning over Yulivanna:

"Let the tears come, dear, let them come.... You mustn't keep it all bottled up inside, you'll just shrivel up that way.... What's done is done.... Who can help you in this? So let the tears come, dear, let them come...."

Yulivanna did not weep. She did not scream any more, she did not wring her hands, she just stood there, as if turned to stone, and stared and stared out to sea. Everybody stood around and looked now at Yulivanna, now at the green billows crashing with a roar on the sand, and no one knew what to do or say.

Ma was the first to come down to earth. Mitka was still hugging the rock and whining from fear, and Slavka was snivelling and gulping down his sobs while the tears poured down his face. Ma grabbed Mitka's hand, jerked him up, gave him a spank and chased him home. Slavka, too. She shouted at Yurka, but Yurka did not obey her. He could not go. He was shaking so terribly that his teeth chattered; he was shivering as from cold on this sweltering day, and hugged himself tight to stop the shaking, but it did not help.

Grandpa now went up to Yulivanna.

"A mishap is always a mishap," he said, and his wrinkled face became even more wrinkled, "And it's all one now, whether you stand here or not...."

"Come along, dearie, come away from here," Maximovna cooed. "What's the good of standing here and breaking your heart? It's not made of stone, you know...."

Ma and Pa also started consoling and coaxing Yulivanna, telling her that there was no helping anything now, no good would come of her breaking her heart, and standing here was asking for trouble too.... Yulivanna did not listen or hear them, she went on staring fixedly at the roaring waves, and suddenly it was as if something broke inside her, her shoulders drooped, and her arms fell limply. Yurka thought she was going to fall, but Maximovna quickly hugged her and led her home. The wind whipped at Yulivanna's wet, torn dress and flung her tangled hair over her face. She did not seem to notice it, she walked with her eyes on the ground, and all at once she became so small and so pitiful that a lump rose in Yurka's throat and stayed there.

They came to the tent. Maximovna wanted her to sit down, but Yulivanna would not sit down, she shook off Maximovna's arm, looked wildly about her, as if she could not understand why they had brought her here, and turned to go back to the sea, but Maximovna clutched at her and Grandpa blocked the way.

"No," he said, "you mustn't go there now. You can't help him, and you might come to grief yourself.... Sit here awhile, or else come to the house with us...."

Yulivanna shook her head.

"Well, if you won't you won't, but you mustn't go back there. One

mishap's enough. Look here, Fyodor, you'll have to go to Grokhovka. The Village Soviet's got to be notified, let them get in touch with the District Soviet, because there's no telling where he might be washed up...."

Yulivanna's face twitched, she bit her lip and then, taking a hold on herself, said with an effort, still staring at the ground:

"Send a telegram.... There's money in my bag, in the tent. His passport and address are there too...."

"Who's the telegram to?"

"His wife."

Pa's jaw dropped, Grandpa's eyes hid in his wrinkles, and Ma and Maximovna, their faces suddenly gone wooden, exchanged meaningful looks.

"How d'you mean," said Grandpa. "Why, I...."

Yulivanna lifted her head and looked straight into his face.

"I am not his wife.... We.... What's it to you, anyway?"

She turned and went back to the beach. Everyone was so flabbergasted that nobody stopped her now and just watched her walking faster and faster, going down the knoll, stopping suddenly, and falling. Pa wanted to run to her, but Ma yelled at him:

"Where're you going? You've no business there."

And Pa did not go. But Nyushka did run to Yulivanna, and Fyodor too, and Yurka came behind Fyodor.

Nyushka was already kneeling beside Yulivanna, calling her name and touching her, but Yulivanna did not answer or stir. Horrified, Yurka thought that she was dead because her face had turned so grey, but Nyushka pressed her ear to Yulivanna's breast, listened, and said:

"Seems alive. Just barely.... What are we going to do now?"

"Let's carry her to the tent, she can't just lie around here," Fyodor said.

Fyodor took her by the shoulders and raised her. Nyushka gripped her legs at the knees, and they carried her up the knoll. Yulivanna's left arm was dangling, Yurka ran to her and lifted it. The arm was cold and seemed quite dead.

They laid her down under a tamarisk shrub in the thin shade.

"She's in a faint," Pa said. "The thing to do is unbutton everything and give her a sniff of smelling salts."

"What's there to unbutton," Nyushka said, "when all she has on is a bathing suit and this smock thing."

"A faint, huh!" said Maximovna. "Never had one in my life."

"No, not you," Fyodor said with sudden spite. "You won't faint even if you're bashed on the head with a shaft.... Well, why do you just stand there? Do something!"

“No need,” Grandpa said. “Let her be, she’ll lie here for a little while and be right as rain.”

Nyushka refused to wait and started blowing into Yulivanna’s face and fanning her with her hands, then she took some water into her mouth and sprinkled Yulivanna, she did it again and again, but it was no use — Yulivanna did not stir.

“So that’s what kind of business it was,” Grandpa said.

“It’s enough to knock anyone out,” Pa took up eagerly.

“That’s for sure, struck me all of a heap it did.”

“And I, I’ll have you know, guessed it long ago. It stuck out a mile, I have an eye for such things....”

“You keep quiet!” Ma shut him up. “You’ve an eye for other things too.... And what are you doing here?” she yelled at Mitka and Slavka. “Go back home this minute!”

But Mitka and Slavka did not go because just then Senka-Angel arrived. He waved to them from afar and shouted:

“Salute, good folks! What made you all leave home in a body? I drove up — the doors are wide open, and not a soul about. We’ve a right to loaf because the damned ferry isn’t working again, but what about you, people?”

“Our camper has drowned,” Grandpa told him.

The news wiped the animation off Senka’s face.

“How come?”

“He went swimming, that’s how.”

“Was he pulled out?”

“Fat chance in this storm....”

“And...” Senka searched with his eyes and found Yulivanna lying on the ground. “And what’s wrong with her?”

“Who can tell, maybe she’s alive, maybe she’s dead....”

“And, by the way, do you know what she turned out to be?” Pa asked.

“What?”

“You know what,” Pa said and winked.

“And you’re a saint?” Senka sounded livid. “Even your wife knows about your saintly doings....”

“Keep your nose out of our affairs!” Ma snapped at him.

“I don’t give a hang for your affairs.... But she, maybe she’s dying and you, the great saints, are standing over her and wagging your tongues!”

“You’d think we’re doctors or something,” said Maximovna.

“I’d tell you what you are.... Here, Fyodor, let’s carry her to my lorry.... And you, kids, rake up some straw.”

Yurka and Slavka dashed to the stack.

"Mind you don't pull from the middle," Grandpa shouted after them. "Not from the middle, from the outside, mind!"

To spite him, Yurka and Slavka pulled heaps of straw from the middle where it was best, and carried it to the lorry. It was parked at their gate. Senka let down the rear side, spread the straw on the floor, covered it with a blanket which Nyushka brought from the tent, and then, together with Fyodor, lifted Yulivanna and laid her down.

She was like one dead.

"This won't do," Senka said. "Somebody's got to hold her."

"Where are you going to take her?" Fyodor asked. "You can't get through to Yevpatoria now."

"I'll take her to the hospital in Chernomorsk. It's only twenty-two kilometres away."

"May I come with you?" Yurka asked.

"What next!" Ma said. "You're not going anywhere!"

"Come, Fyodor, will you be the one?" Senka asked.

Fyodor climbed into the lorry and sat down beside Yulivanna. Senka raised the side and bolted it.

"Listen here, Senka," Grandpa said. "Here's his passport and some money, send a telegram to his address, to his wife, that is. And report to whoever's concerned."

"Naturally."

Senka slammed the door of the cab, drove carefully down to the dirt road, and turned left, to Chernomorsk. The wind had swept the road clean of dust, and so the lorry remained in sight for a long time, until it was hidden by the slope.

"Some ending to a vacation," said Grandpa.

"A honeymoon, rather," added Pa.

"Oh Lord in heaven, what kind of people are you!" Nyushka gave a sob and ran home.

"Easy there!" Pa shot at her back. "Wipe your snot before you talk to your elders!"

"Another person's soul is a forest dark, and there's no truer saying," said Grandpa. "And we don't want to meddle.... Let everything stay in their tent the way it was. And none of us should go in. Not before she comes back, or maybe the wife arrives...."

"If she comes by plane she might be here tomorrow," Pa said. "I can see the hair flying!"

"That's their affair and has nothing to do with us."

Yurka saw how Ma and Maximovna glanced at each other, he saw how Pa smirked and winked, and ran away. He could not take any more, he

could not bear to see them exchanging looks, winking, nodding knowingly and talking and talking, saying something he could not understand, something slippery, and they actually seemed to enjoy themselves too. Oh, how could they!

The wind resisted him, pushed him in the chest, but Yurka stubbornly ran on, crouching a little, until he came to the spot where it happened. This is where he had dived into the wave, and from over there he had raised his hand and shouted something, and they'd never know now why and what he shouted. And here Yulivanna had been knocked down by a wave, Yurka had clutched at her dress and torn it, and now she was jolting in the lorry on the road to Chernomorsk, and maybe she was dying, or was already dead....

There was not a soul on the whole stretch of the shore, just the seething breakers, even the seagulls and sand pipers had all taken cover somewhere, and there was only the blazing sun in the sky, burning you and blinding you, and the green waves rolling and rolling, crashing down on the beach, roaring and boiling as they swept back, and the wind chasing tatters of foam along the sand and spraying water dust.... Yurka's face became wet, his lips tasted salty, and the lump in his throat choked him more and more. He sat down on the sand beside the sandstone rock where he had sat with Vitaly Sergeyevich only the other day and burst out crying in loud, unashamed sobs.

He sat there for a long time, weeping in great shuddering sobs, then he wiped his face with a sleeve and started along the beach — maybe he had been cast ashore already.... He came as far as the signal tower which once, before the ferry had been started, had a beacon on it to be lit at night. Yes, Pa was right about the wave. The roaring, seething water was licking the sand and carrying everything away with it. Only later, when the storm began to abate, the swell would throw up whatever it had washed away and dragged off into the deep.

It was almost evening when the lorry roared to a stop in front of the house. Fyodor jumped down from the cab, and Senka swung round and drove off at once. Nyushka came running, and so did Yurka.

"How is she?" Nyushka asked.

"She almost didn't make it," Fyodor said with a hopeless gesture. "And what's more the bastards there didn't want to admit her. 'What? No passport? We've no right!...' Well, Senka and I kicked up such a row...."

"But she, how is she now?"

"She's in shock, they say. And they said something else about her heart, it's sick or something.... Here, take his passport and give it to Grandpa."

"What does it mean — in shock?"

“How do I know, am I a doctor? Come on, I want to eat, I’m dog-hungry.”

Slavka started snoring the minute he got into bed, but Yurka could not fall asleep for a long time, he lay tossing and turning, going over everything in his mind again and again, everything from the very beginning: how Vitaly Sergeyevich and Yulivanna arrived in their car, how they set up their tent and started living in it, how nice they always were to each other and to Yurka and the kids, how they went walking and swimming together, how they went to town and drank *bouza*.... And even Yulivanna calling him that name seemed such a small thing now.... She meant it for his own good. She had always been so gay, so happy, she actually glowed with happiness. And now look what happened — Vitaly Sergeyevich drowned, and she — dying in hospital from a sick heart and some other thing, and being surrounded by strangers with nobody wanting to help her.... If only Yurka could, he’d do anything, just anything to help her, but what could he do? Then his thoughts became muddled and dark, and suddenly it was as if he and not Vitaly Sergeyevich went swimming in the raging sea, a wave went over him and held him under water, and not simply held him but squeezed his throat harder and harder. Yurka began to gasp, and then he had no breath left at all....

He woke up and threw Slavka’s arm off his throat. It was the dead of night and there was a downpour outside. The rain was so noisy that Yurka lifted his head and looked about him in perplexity. The door, he saw, was wide open and letting in the rain. What surprised him even more than the noisy downpour was the open door because it was always fastened with a hook for the night. What if some outsider had opened it? A robber? Only what was there to steal, and who would come here anyway? And there was Zhuchka out in the yard. She was taken off the chain at night, and she wouldn’t let anyone near the house. Yurka sat up and took a good look about him. Mitka and Lenka were fast asleep. And anyway they wouldn’t go out in the rain, Ma was asleep too. Pa wasn’t there. He must have gone to the toilet, he didn’t shut the door properly, and the wind had flung it wide open. Yurka knew he should get up and close the door because a great big puddle had already formed this side of the threshold, but it was a bother getting out of bed and going out into the rain, and then Pa would be back soon. Yurka lay still and listened to the rain, and now through the splashing and the pattering just outside he was able to distinguish the more distant roar and pounding of the surf. This meant that the storm was still going strong. The rain came lashing down less fiercely and the wash of the sea sounded all the louder for it, and still Pa did not come. The puddle on the floor was spreading wider and wider. Yurka sprang out of bed, ran to

the door, and there was Pa, soaking wet, starting up the porch steps.

"What's the matter? Where did you go?" he asked Yurka angrily.

"You left the door open, see the puddle...."

"Go back to sleep, it's not your worry."

Pa closed the door, and the sound of the rain was muffled at once. He fumbled in the dark for a while longer, probably drying his wet face and hands, then the bedsprings creaked which meant that he lay down.

In the morning the sky was cloudless again as if there had been no rain in the night, and even the puddles had dried up. The ground was still a bit wet, and Yurka slipped and nearly fell when he ran skirting the knoll to the sea. The storm had not abated a bit. If anything, the swell was stronger, the water roared as savagely, and the wind again carried tatters of foam and spray. Yurka stared his eyes out but did not see anything. The waves still licked the sand greedily, hollowing out the edge of the beach.

Coming home, Yurka saw a crowd gathered in the yard. There was Grandpa's eldest son, also called Timofei, who worked as a buoy keeper at the ferry; there was his fat wife, and her sister. They may have come over because this was Sunday, or maybe because they had heard about the accident and wanted to see where it happened. Sashka had probably come with them too.

Yurka went up to the camp. Someone had left a muddy print of his palm on the orange tent, just beside the entrance flap. There was one more print, a smudgy one. This was made by a small hand, and Yurka guessed at once that it was Sashka's doing, the nasty sneak. Or could it be Slavka's? Yurka went home at a run to make sure.

Grandpa and his son were standing apart from the rest and talking quietly, while Maximovna was telling the story to her daughter-in-law and her sister, talking at the top of her voice:

"I might have guessed it right away.... Why, he fairly laid himself out to please her.... Would a husband, grey-haired at that, make such a song and dance about his wedded wife—darling this and darling that?"

Sashka was nowhere about. Nor was Slavka. Yurka went round the house, and there was Slavka trying on Sashka's new sailor's hat. The word "Hero" was printed in gold letters on the ribbon. The hat was too small for Slavka, and he handed it back to Sashka.

"Who went to the tent?" Yurka shouted. "Who smeared it? You?"

"No, I didn't," Slavka replied.

Yurka saw from his eyes that he was telling the truth, and turned on Sashka.

"Was it you?"

Sashka averted his eyes thievishly.

“What tent? Why should I go there?”

Yurka swung and biffed him. Whining, Sashka ran off to tell on Yurka. But Yurka did not stay to wait for punishment. While Grandpa and even Sashka’s father would not meddle, Ma and Maximovna would raise the roof.

“Come on, let’s go and look, maybe he’s been washed ashore,” Yurka said to Slavka.

“Nothing doing,” Slavka shook his head so vigorously that Yurka let him be, if that’s how scared he was of seeing a dead body.

He went alone. He walked as far as the signal tower again, then turned and walked back to the cliff. The sea here had gone raving mad. The waves bombarded the cliff, shot up in fountains of water, the wind tore into these fountains and hurled them on the beach. Yurka sat there for a long time, listening to the thundering crash and feeling the earth quake under him. At last, thirst and hunger drove him home.

The guests had gone, but Maximovna had not forgotten her grandson’s whines and turned on Yurka, and Ma scolded him too, but he did not care.

In the evening, a militiaman arrived on his motorcycle. He asked how the accident had happened, and put them all down as witnesses. They were all there except Pa, who had gone somewhere.

“Good. These are enough,” the militiaman said. “Their belongings must be put in order.”

“That’s no concern of ours,” Grandpa told him. “We don’t go up there, we’re not getting mixed up in this business. Let their belongings wait until that fancy lady comes back or the relatives arrive. But if you like, you can take the lot away or seal it up, the way it’s done.”

“What am I to seal it up with, my finger? All right, I’ll leave it in your care. Let me know if the relatives don’t show up.”

He twirled the handle on the handlebar, kicked at a lever, the motorcycle began to chirr, he jumped on and was off.

Pa did not come home until dark, and he was drunk. Ma cursed him for running up a debt again at Alka’s and Pa yelled that it wasn’t her worry, he wouldn’t come begging to her, and she was a fool because she couldn’t understand what a man was lost to them, and how he would have helped Pa to make his way in the world and meet that Moscow artist.... Yurka hated it when Pa came home drunk, but this time he did not feel angry with him because it was so unexpected that Pa should take Vitaly Sergeyevich’s death so much to heart.

The wind dropped during the night, and in the morning it stopped blowing altogether. But the sea still roared and pounded, the ferry wasn’t working, and the road was empty. And suddenly a grey, dusty Volga with

little black squares painted on the doors rolled up to the house. The driver, obviously in a bad temper, got out first. Next came a skinny chap wearing glasses and black clothes in spite of the heat, all black even down to his shirt, and after him came a lady with a withered face, puffy from tears and thickly powdered. She wore lipstick, but it was smudged save on the edges and you could see that she really had a mean, thin mouth, painted to make it seem sweeter. The skinny chap was as thin-lipped, but his tall forehead and thin nose were exactly like Vitaly Sergeyevich's, and Yurka guessed that they were his wife and son.

The driver mopped his perspiring face, and grumbled: "Damn this road! Had I known how bad the road was I'd never have agreed...."

"You are paid for it," the skinny chap said glumly.

"A lot of use your money will be to me. If the car breaks down who's going to pay?"

Vitaly Sergeyevich's wife and son did not answer the driver and walked into the yard. Grandpa went forward to greet them, and Ma and Maximovna came on the run. The faces of both were sad and full of sympathy.

"We received a telegram," the lady said. "It's somewhere here that my husband ... my husband...." Her lips began to tremble and she could not bring out the word she had to speak.

"Vitaly Sergeyevich Voronin," said the bespectacled skinny chap. "Where is he?"

Grandpa's face wrinkled up pitifully.

"Where could he be? Over there...."

Everyone glanced over the fence at the roaring, foaming sea.

"Haven't they found him?" asked the young chap.

"We tried. What a hope! It's a sea, you know. And in storm, too...."

"But why here? What was he doing here?" asked the lady. "He sent me a telegram from Yevpatoria...."

"Why, they lived here. In that tent, over there on the knoll."

"They? What do you mean — 'they'?"

"Well, he and a lady who came with him.... Yulia Ivanovna, her name is."

"I knew it, I suspected that he was with her again," the lady screamed and her face became ugly. "It's her doing! It's she who drove him to it, killed him...."

"Really, Mummy!" the young chap said crossly.

"Do you expect me to take it quietly? No, I won't keep my mouth shut! I'll tell her exactly what I think of her.... Where is that vile creature?"

"She's been taken to hospital. She had a shock or some such thing...."

"A shock? I hope she never recovers from this shock!"

The lady screamed and wept, while her son tried to stop her without much success. Ma and Maximovna looked on with sorrowful sympathy on their faces and a wild curiosity in their eyes. Pa came, said "how-de-do" with his smartest salute, but no notice was taken of him.

"Is there any hope of finding the body?" the son asked.

"It's quite an easy thing," Pa said. "When gases are formed inside the body of a drowned man it always surfaces...."

The son gave Pa a glare, and turned to Grandpa.

"Who can tell? When the storm passes maybe it will be cast up."

"Will the storm last long?"

"Not likely. This time of the year a storm rarely lasts long."

"Then we'll have to wait," the son said to the mother. "We'll have to live here for a few days."

"Where?"

The son's glance slid over the yard, littered with goose droppings, and the white-washed walls of the house.

"Not here, naturally. It's hard to get rooms in a hotel in Yevpatoria, but we'll get fixed up.... And where is the car, and Father's things?" he asked Grandpa.

"All safe and intact."

Mother and son started up the knoll, Grandpa and Pa went with them, and Yurka followed. The son pulled the canvas off the car, while his mother went into the tent and things came flying out—Yulivanna's crumpled clothes, her handbag, and her unzipped checked suitcase. She came out now, looking red and hot from the angry effort.

"The lot," she said. "There's nothing else there of hers, so you can take down the tent."

The son swept up the scattered clothes, stuffed them into the suitcase, pulled the zip, and set it at Grandpa's feet.

"What am I to do with it?" Grandpa asked.

"Anything you want. You can throw it away. Or keep it for that...."

Grandpa sighed, and carried the suitcase home. The son started taking down the tent. The bad-tempered driver came and stood for a while, watching the skinny chap's fumbings, and then said:

"Are we going to be all night? We'll have to go round that damned estuary again. If you don't get a move on, we'll never make it before dark."

"You will," Pa said.

"Are you telling me? That road's made for mule carts, not cars."

"Perhaps we should take these things with us in the taxi?" the lady asked her son.

"What things?" roared the driver. "You want my springs to bust?"

"I wish we could find a driver here who'd agree to drive the Volga to Moscow," said the son. "We needn't fly then."

"Why not?" Pa responded eagerly and began to fuss. "It's the easiest thing. There's a driver at the collective farm in Grokhovka, a mere five kilometres away, and he has a high rating, by the way. Everyone knows him. His nickname is Senka-Angel."

"How can I find him?"

"Well, I could make the trip with you," Pa said. "After all, one's got to help in a business like this...."

The driver took some coaxing, but finally agreed to take them to Grokhovka and back. The three men left. The wife, who was packing things into the car, turned round and saw Yurka.

"What do you want?"

"Nothing," Yurka said with a shrug.

"Then run along, and don't be a nuisance."

Yurka went away. He knew now why Vitaly Sergeyevich had left her. But maybe she hadn't always been like that?

She came into the yard after a little while. Ma and Maximovna made her sit where it was cooler and, outshouting one another, told her how Vitaly Sergeyevich lived here with Yulivanna, slinging muck at Yulivanna. The lady wept, her face twitching and twisting.

You could see that she felt hurt and ashamed to listen, but she listened avidly just the same, and Ma and Maximovna talked and talked.... Yurka could not understand why they were doing it. When everything was all right didn't they cringe to Yulivanna and all but jump out of their skins, and now?

The taxi returned, but Pa wasn't in it.

"And where's Pa?" Yurka asked the bespectacled skinny chap.

"Who? Oh, that one?... He stayed in the village."

"Well, is the driver coming?" his mother asked him.

"No, he's not."

"Perhaps you didn't offer him enough?"

"Two hundred roubles not enough? He's a swine, not an angel. And such arrogant talk too! 'I don't make money on the dead,' he says."

"What shall we do then?"

"But I told you, I can drive it over myself," the driver said. "I'll get my mate at the garage to do a couple of days' shift for me, and I'll bring the car over."

"Very well, but in the meantime? The car and the things can't be left here, can they?"

"Why not? Let them. We've no thieves here," Grandpa said.

"Really, now!" the lady cut him short. "We might leave the car in the yard here. We'll be taking less of a risk."

The driver took the key, came back in Vitaly Sergeyevich's car, parked it in front of Grandpa's windows and locked it. Mother and son got into the taxi and drove off.

Yurka was hoping that Pa would have learnt something about Yulivanna from Senka, but he came home late, he was drunk again, and didn't know anything about Yulivanna.

The surf was not so fierce next morning, the ferry was working again, and vehicles streamed down the road. Yurka kept running there hoping to see Senka's lorry, but he probably missed it every time. He also went walking along the beach, looking. The sea, as it calmed down, flung driftwood, weeds and brown lumps of sea-nettle on the beach. In the evening, Grandpa's eldest son dropped in on his way home from work and told them that Vitaly Sergeyevich's body had been washed ashore beyond the ferry and it had been taken away to Yevpatoria. Next, the cashier arrived in the old, battered Pobeda in which he made the rounds of the road-repair teams, bringing them their pay. Ma took and hid her money and Pa's, too, but he came home drunk that night all the same. A couple of days later the bus brought Vitaly Sergeyevich's son and the taxi driver. They got into the Volga and drove away, the son saying good-bye only to Grandpa, and very surlily at that.

Yurka went up the knoll. It looked stripped and desolate. Grandpa had already pulled out the pegs, and the holes they left and the square of crushed, faded grass were the only reminders that once there was a tent here, chairs and a table standing under an awning, Yulivanna making dinner on her gas stove, Vitaly Sergeyevich watching her with a smile, and the world seeming so happy, so jolly for everyone.... A hard lump rose in Yurka's throat again. He turned homeward. A sheet of white paper had got tangled in the roots of the tamarisk shrubs. Yurka picked it up. It was Vitaly Sergeyevich's drawing which he had named "Happiness". That mean hag with the tear-stained, puffy face must have thrown it out of the tent with the other things, and someone had trodden on it—the paper was torn a bit and there was a heel print on it. Yurka cleaned the picture carefully, and walked back a step. Yulivanna's happy, laughing eyes looked straight at him. He rolled the drawing up. At first he wanted to take it home, but then he thought that if Ma saw it she'd be sure to throw it away. And so he went to the barn and hid it in the slit between the wall and the roof.

And still there was no sight of Senka-Angel, or maybe he had driven past

but had not wanted to stop. And Yurka did not know anything about Yulivanna. If he had some money he would take the bus to Chernomorsk and go to the hospital, but he had no money and it was no use asking Ma. She'd make him tell her why he wanted to go to Chernomorsk, and if he told her she wouldn't let him go. Days passed, and Yurka was beginning to think that Yulivanna had died, or else, not wanting to be seen again where such a terrible thing had happened, she had simply gone back to Moscow.



8

He had quite stopped waiting when she came. This was in the evening when everyone was back from work, they'd had dinner and were sitting out in the yard. They were all there except Nyushka and Fyodor. Pa was drunk again, but not too drunk. He hadn't been to Grokhovka lately, so he must have brought a supply back with him sometime before and hidden it for a rainy day, no one knew where. Ma had searched high and low and never found a bottle, yet Pa had vodka on his breath all the time, and towards the end of the day he got completely soused.

Ma was scolding and nagging him, but he merely waved her off and said: "Aw, go on with you...."

Maximovna looked at Pa with spiteful contempt, and Grandpa sat wrinkling up his face and keeping his silence.

"You should go a bit easier on it, Alexander," he spoke up at last. "Because what has it come to? Day after day, and every blessed day...."

Suddenly Yulivanna appeared in the gate. She wore the same dress, but she had changed so much that Yurka did not recognise her at first. Her

walk used to be quick and light, she seemed hardly to touch the ground, and now she moved slowly and cautiously as though she were afraid to miss her footing. She had sort of drooped, grown suddenly old, with all life gone from her. The dimples in her cheeks had become deep lines, her suntan had changed to sallowness, and her full red lips had gone pale and limp. A little behind her came Senka-Angel.

Grandpa fell silent, and all of them were also silent as they watched Yulivanna and Senka coming towards them across the yard. Pa began to fidget, and Ma and Maximovna put on cold, forbidding expressions.

"Good evening," Yulivanna said in a colourless voice.

"Good evening to you," Grandpa replied.

No one else replied to her greeting, but she did not seem to notice. She searched with her eyes for a chair to sit on, but there were no vacant chairs. Yurka darted to the barn, fetched the stool which stood there beside the door, and set it down before Yulivanna.

"Thanks, Yura," she said.

Yurka remembered the drawing, darted to the barn again and got it out of its hiding place. He gave it to Yulivanna. She started unrolling the paper, recognised the drawing, her lips began to tremble, and she hurriedly rolled it up again.

"You got well, I see," Grandpa said.

"What? Oh yes, I'm almost well."

"And by the way," Pa said, "Mrs. Voronina was here. She came with her son."

Yulivanna looked into his face.

"I know."

"Well, they left your things with us," Grandpa put in quickly, afraid that Pa might say something he shouldn't and thus cause trouble. "Your things are safe and intact. I'll go and bring them this minute."

He went into the house. Everyone was silent and carefully avoided looking at one another and at Yulivanna more particularly, but again she seemed not to notice.

"Here you are," Grandpa said, placing the checked suitcase before her. "What's in it I don't know, I didn't pack it, *they* did."

"Thank you," Yulivanna said.

She unzipped the suitcase, took out her handbag, opened it and frowned in puzzlement. She put the suitcase on the stool, opened it wide, felt in the pocket, thrust her hand under the clothes and rummaged there, and then, with a lost look about her, lifted the suitcase and dumped everything out. Her dresses and things fell on the stool and spilled on the ground.

Yulivanna passed her hand over her face and again looked about her in confusion.

"It's strange," she said. "I don't remember where, but I did have some money.... Not very much, but anyway...."

Pa began to fidget terribly, Grandpa's eyes hid into their wrinkles, and Maximovna pursed her lips until they made a small, thin line. Yurka felt hot all over.

"That's no concern of ours," Grandpa said. "Maybe it was there, or maybe it wasn't. We never touched your money. They packed your things, and that's how they are...."

"Of course!" Yulivanna said. "How could you think that I.... I don't suspect you of anything. I suppose she thought it was *his* money, and took it all away...."

"And why not, it's the easiest thing," Pa said.

"We did not touch your things," Maximovna said in a wooden voice. "And all this is no concern of ours. Settle it between you two yourselves."

"Yes, yes, of course," Yulivanna said. "Only, what am I to do now? I must go home and I've no money for the fare, not a kopek.... I've no money even for a telegram...."

Pa fidgeted silently, and everyone else seemed turned to stone.

"I'd be very grateful," Yulivanna said, "if you'd please lend me fifty roubles ... or forty, at least.... I'll return it at once, by telegraphic order...."

She lifted her head and looked at everyone in turn, but no one looked back at her or answered. The silence dragged. It dragged terribly.

"Of all the nerve!" Ma said. "If we had money to spare we'd also go gallivanting about the seaside resorts.... And here we don't know what to stuff the kids' bellies with...."

"We don't print our own money," Maximovna said. "We have none to burn."

"But what am I to do? I'm only asking you to lend me some, I'll return it at once.... If you like, I'll leave my things with you as security...."

Senka-Angel started picking up her scattered clothes and stuffing them into the suitcase.

"What use are they to us?" Ma said. "We're not show-offs, we're working people...."

Yulivanna looked at Grandpa, but he made no response. Maximovna, with her lips pursed, had turned her face away, and Pa was fidgeting and sort of smirking. Yulivanna passed her hand over her face again and said in a voice you could hardly hear:

"What am I to do then?"

Senka zipped her suitcase.

"Who are you asking?" he said. "Ask them for a handful of snow in winter, and they'll die first...."

"Keep your mind to yourself!" Maximovna flared up. "We're not counting your money, and not asking you to count ours."

"It's money that belongs to others that you like to count best, skinflints that you are, bursting with envy.... Come on, let's go. You'll never get anything from them."

He picked up the suitcase, gripped Yulivanna's arm with his huge hand and led her to the gate as if she were a child.

"Look at the gallant!" Maximovna spat venomously. "One gets drowned, and another pops into his place.... Her kind always land on their feet...."

"A smooth worker, too," Ma said. "She'd get the money from us and that's the last we would hear of her!"

Yurka ached with pity for poor Yulivanna, and suddenly this feeling changed to hatred, to blind fury. He was shaking all over as on the beach that day.

"Aren't you rotten, the lot of you!" he said. "Lowdown, lousy cheapskates!"

"What's got into you?" Grandpa opened his eyes in amazement. "Who are you saying this to, eh?"

"To you! To you, and to you, and to you.... The whole bloody lot of you. You're lying that you have no money, you just got your pay.... And you won't even lend it, you damned skinflints!"

"Listen to the squirt!" Maximovna shrieked. "Why don't you do something? It's you who brought up this ruffian!"

Ma struck Yurka on the face with the back of her hand. He clutched at his cheek and jumped away. He knew that he was in for a beating, but he could not stop now and went on yelling what he thought of them, hurrying to say it all:

"You're going to beat me up? Go ahead! Bloody, stinking cheapskates, you are anyway. When Uncle Vitya was alive you kept running to them and licking their backsides, eating their food and guzzling their drinks, and now you can't lend her money! And what *did* happen to her money? You stole it, that's what."

"Who stole it?" Pa leapt up. "I'll show you, calling us thieves!"

He caught Yurka by the arm, and hit him on the face.

Pa was quick to start a fight, but he had no strength and in a real rough house he always got the worst of it. But he was the stronger now, and so he hit Yurka where he knew it hurt most.

Yurka screamed, writhed, and struggled, but Pa held him fast and hit him more and more viciously.

Ducking, Yurka butted him in the stomach. Pa gasped, and bent over double, clutching at his belly. Yurka sprang aside. His face was bruised and bleeding, but he felt no pain. He was shaking from hatred.

"May it all happen to you.... For everything.... Dirty cheapskates! I don't want to, I'm not going to live with you.... May you all go to hell!"

Ma made a rush at him, but Yurka dodged and ran to the gate.

"Go on, run!" Ma yelled. "You'll come running back quick enough when you want grub!"

Yurka's bruised face felt hot, and the drying crust of blood pinched his swollen lips. He was afraid to go to the water well, it was too near his home, and so he went down to the sea. It was breathing slowly and calmly, as if resting after the hard job of storming. Sunbeams now broke up, multiplied and dazzled the eyes where only a few days ago the waves with their shaggy white manes raced madly shoreward over the black depths. Yurka took off his clothes, waded into the sea and, standing chest-deep, bathed his face. Just by touching it he realised how swollen it was.

Two figures appeared on the knoll. Yurka made a dash for his clothes, but he looked again and saw that it was only Slavka and Mitka. They came running to him now.

"Gosh, how he smashed your face!" Slavka said.

Mitka, with his tears just dried, merely gaped at Yurka in silent horror with his "shutters" open wide.

"But you gave him a good punch too! Gosh, how he yelled when he got his breath back! 'I'll knock his block off,' he yelled, 'I'll skin him!'"

"That's the last beating he gave me," Yurka said. "I'm not coming home any more."

"Never-never?"

Yurka nodded.

"But where will you live?"

"Anywhere, only not with them, the mean pigs...."

Slavka took a worried look about him as if looking for a spot where Yurka might live. All he saw was the sea and the sand.

"Sure," Slavka said. "But what will you eat?"

"I'll find something to eat."

Yurka said this very resolutely, but immediately remembered Vitaly Sergeyevich telling him how he tried to run away from home when he was Yurka's age. He had taken a loaf of bread with him. And Yurka had nothing. He wasn't hungry just yet, but he would be later.... But he wasn't going to take any of *their* bread, that's for sure.

"Run home and bring me my rod. And a box of matches," he told Slavka.

"You'll live on the fish you catch? Let me stay with you. We'll live together, fish, and, well, just live.... What's wrong with that? It's warm now, we can live here or go to the estuary. No, those flies there.... Why, we can live right here or on the cliff. We'll dig out a cave and we'll live in it.... That would be something! What d'you say?"

Slavka's eyes sparkled at the thought of the fun it would be to live on their own in a cave. Yurka would have been as excited if the idea had occurred to them before. But he could not rise to it now.

Something had broken off inside him or twisted, so that it could not be stuck back on or turned into place, and suddenly he felt years older.

"You're a kid," he said to Slavka. "Playing games is all you want, and when you feel hungry you'll run home to Ma."

"And you?" Slavka said in a huff. "You'll run home too."

"They'll have a long wait."

Mitka raised his fluffy eyelashes, looked at Yurka, and dropped his "shutters" again.

"But where will you go?" Slavka asked.

"To the boarding school in Chernomorsk. That's where I'll live."

Yurka knew very well that the boarding school was hard to get into, and since there was no one to do the pushing for him, he had no chance of being admitted. He was lying purposely, for Mitka's benefit. Mitka would believe him, and as he hadn't learnt to fib yet he'd tell if anyone asked him where Yurka had gone. Let them think he was in Chernomorsk, and time would show....

Slavka went home for the fishing rods. Mitka remained squatting there a bit longer, staring at the ground and thinking about something, and then he trotted after Slavka.

Slavka would bring the fishing rods, stay until dark maybe, then he'd go home, and Yurka would be left alone. Quite alone. For the rest of his life. He would not return home no matter what. And not because of the beating. Yurka felt his swollen face. It hurt to touch. Small matter, it would pass. He had been beaten up before, not so hard maybe, but anyway that wasn't the point.... He seemed to hear again Yulivanna's lifeless voice and to see her pitiful, bewildered face, with Ma looking at her spitefully and spitting out words, Pa winking and smirking, Grandpa wrinkling up with put-on kindness and never really caring, and Maximovna hissing like a snake.... They had all envied Yulivanna, bowed and scraped before her, and now they seemed to be glad that she was unhappy, they gloated over her misery and wanted to make it worse, taking it out on her for being better off and

happier than they were.... And who had stolen the money? Where did Pa go that night in the rain? And why did he fly into such a rage and start hitting Yurka on the face? To shut him up? All right, supposing it was not they who took the money. But they did have money in the house, they'd just been paid, but they refused to lend her any, and for all they cared she could go hang herself.... When Vitaly Sergeyeovich got drowned they came running with a rope to rescue him, and now that she was drowning, they pushed her in deeper.... Swine!

And what was *he* to do now, where to go? It was easy lying about Chernomorsk, it was good for a story, but going there was a different thing—nowhere to live and nothing to eat. He knew all the boys in Lomovka, if he asked them they'd bring him some bread, but they'd start asking him questions, the whole village would be in the know, Pa and Ma would hear about it, they'd catch him and beat him up again.... The best thing was to go to Grokhovka and find Senka-Angel. He'd know about Yulivanna, too, where she was now and how it was going to be with her.... But where could he go with a face like that? Besides, Grandpa often went to the general store there, and Pa went to Alka's basement, so with his luck he'd bump right into them....

A tiny figure rolled down the knoll and ran to the beach, and next Ma appeared on the knoll—Yurka knew her from the colour of her dress. But she didn't run after Mitka, she merely shook a fist at him, and disappeared in the shrubs. Mitka was holding up his bulging shirt with both hands.

"Here," he said, taking from inside his shirt the top crust ripped off a round loaf of bread.

"Where's Slavka?"

"Ma caught him and locked him up. He wanted to bring you sugar."

"What about you?"

"I ran away when she was whipping him."

"You'll get a whipping too."

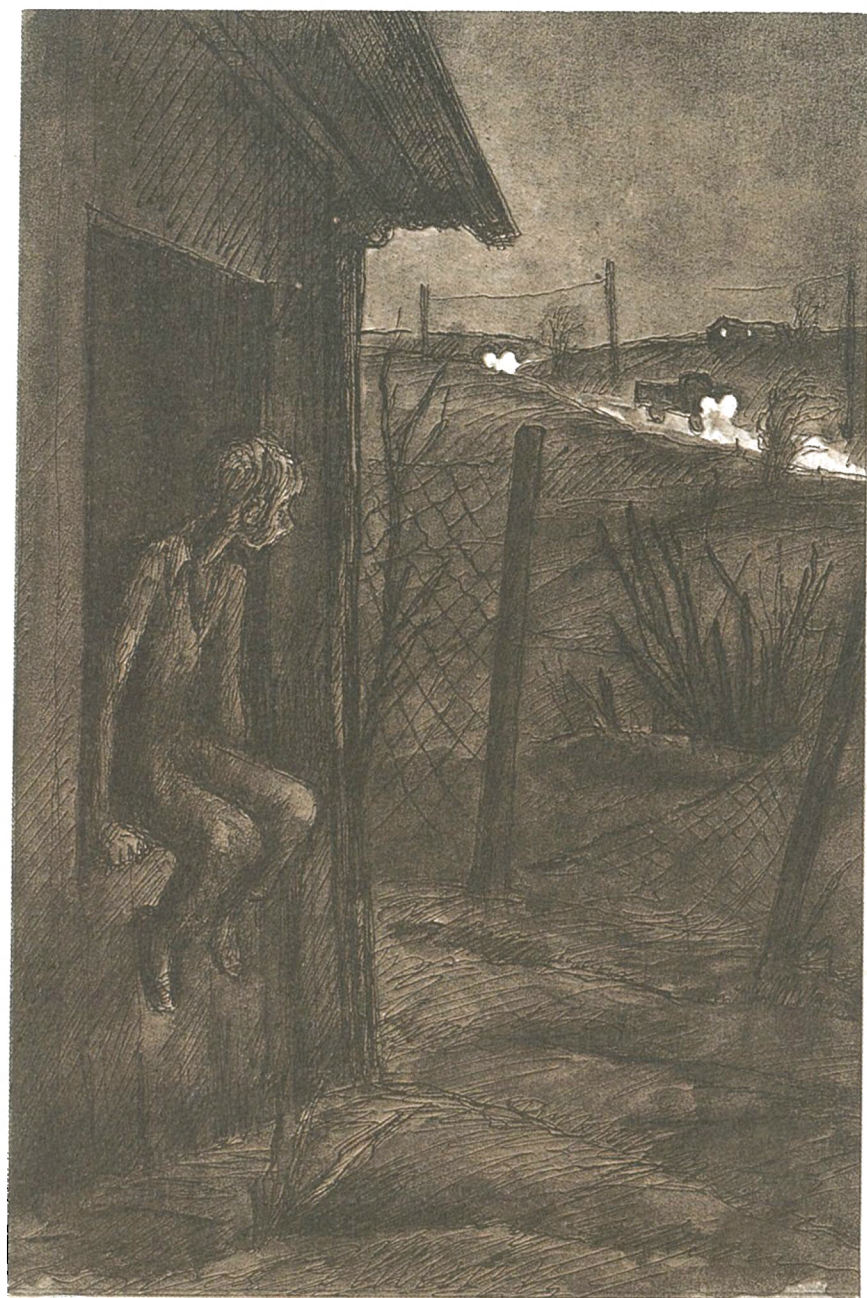
"I will," Mitka sighed.

"Don't go home right away, let her work off her anger first. You tell Slavka I don't want any sugar. I don't want any of their sugar. Tell him to bring the fishing rods in the morning. To the poultry-yard."

"Are you going to sleep there? All by yourself?" Mitka's eyes widened with fear.

"No, I'll come when I see you."

Yurka shoved the bread inside his shirt and started along the beach in the direction of the ferry. He had made up his mind to spend the night at the poultry-yard, but he didn't want to tell Mitka. The poultry-yard was empty, the house was boarded up, but it had a wooden porch, and sleeping



on it was better than on the ground. He'd also have a good view of the house and the road from there, and if he saw danger he could run away. He glanced back. The sun had gone down behind the cliff and the small figure still stood beside the sandstone rock, watching Yurka out of sight. When Yurka reached the estuary where it made an inlet, long and narrow like a tongue, he crossed the road, and went along the bank to the poultry-yard. It was growing dark quickly, and they couldn't have seen him from the house.

The poultry-house was not boarded up any more. Someone had ripped away and carried off the boards which had been nailed across the door and the windows. Nothing surprising about this—you couldn't get any boards for love or money, and here they were for free. Whoever had stolen the boards had also taken the frames of two windows. Before long, Yurka shouldn't wonder, the rest of the frames, the door and everything else that could be ripped away would be stolen too. Yurka climbed into the window opening. The place smelt of dust, mice and bird droppings. He kicked the muck out of one corner, looked for a broom or something to sweep the floor with and, finding nothing, decided he'd do just as well without. He ought to go and get some sedge and rushes to sleep on, but the bank here was swampy and he didn't feel like wading in the mud. He sat on the windowsill for a long time, gazing down the road. A light went on in the house he could not distinguish in the dark, but he knew it was in their room. A procession of twin glow-worms crept along the road—the cars were going towards the ferry, over which hung a cool, lilac glow. He had to decide where he should go tomorrow and what he should do, but he could not think of anything for all his trying.

When the sun rose, the flies attacked him. Yurka climbed out of the window and went to the estuary. The water was warm, it hadn't cooled during the night. His face still hurt to touch but it felt less swollen. He was terribly thirsty. There was no drinking water anywhere except in the well near their house. Yurka glanced there longingly, and suddenly his heart leapt for joy: Slavka and Mitka were running to him along the bank. Slavka would go and fetch some water. Yurka sat down on the porch only to dash the next moment for cover behind the house. A man was walking hurriedly along the road, and when he reached the path he turned to the estuary. Only Pa swung his arms like that. Had Mitka told, or had Pa guessed Yurka's whereabouts himself?

A shallow gully ran down to the estuary not far from the poultry-yard. Rain water and melted snow flowed down it in autumn and winter, and early in spring it sprouted a thin growth of weeds. The grass had already withered and turned yellow. Crouching, Yurka ran up the gully, stopping

now and then and peeping out. Pa had overtaken the boys, and they came and looked round the poultry-house.

And only now it struck Yurka that he had left his bread behind. He left it on the porch when he went down to wash his face, and forgot all about it when he dashed away.... He had saved it, afraid to start on it, and then he felt more thirsty than hungry, and now this.... There was no one to be seen near the poultry-house. Pa was probably hiding, waiting for Yurka to come running for the bread. He could wait!

Yurka had run so far that from where he was the poultry-house looked like a matchbox. No longer afraid that he might be seen and caught, Yurka straightened up and walked more slowly. It was not a steep slope, but Yurka got out of breath, his mouth was dry and he was simply dying for water.

A red tiled roof came into view, and then the low sandstone walls of the house. The sun and rain had made the sandstone look like old bleached bones. The blocks of limestone laid any old how to make the low wall round the house had the same bleached look. Why make the wall at all when there was not a tree, not a blade of green grass, let alone a vegetable patch in the whole of that huge yard? A small pyramid of dung bricks was drying beside a shed as sunken into the ground as the house. A large, shaggy dog jumped out from behind this pyramid and barked. Yurka backed away, but then he saw that the dog was on a chain. A little girl came out of the half-open door and stared at Yurka with frightened eyes.

“Hey, listen, bring me some water to drink!” Yurka called out to her.

The little girl continued to stare at him with the same frightened look for a minute or two, then quickly slipped into the house and slammed the door shut. Yurka waited, with an eye on the shaggy beast. The dog barked, jumped as far as the chain would let him, reared up and pawed the air with its front legs, and dashed about madly, trying to pull the chain out. The door of the house did not open.

To the right, a hundred metres away or so, Yurka saw a well under a shed. A horse in traces was walking in a circle, and a big cage-like drum was revolving above. Dirty-grey sheep were swarming round a long water trough.

The ground had been powdered to dust by the sheep’s sharp hooves and mixed into mud with the water which seeped through the trough. A boy smaller than Slavka was driving the horse on, and a surly-faced man who had not shaved for many a day stood beside the well. Although the sun was already pretty hot, he had on a discoloured tarpaulin raincoat and looked as dirty-grey as the sheep. The drum creaked as the quivering wire rope wound itself round the windlass. The boy gaped at Yurka, forgetting about

the horse, but it needed no urging to plod along its usual circle. The man turned to look at Yurka.

“Good-morning,” Yurka said. “Can I have a drink of water?”

A tub bound with metal hoops came up from the well. It was so huge that Yurka might easily have hidden in it. The boy stopped the horse, the man pulled the tub to the side of the well, tipped it over into a slimy chute covered with green mold in the corners, and the water gushed into the drinking trough. From the bag hanging over his shoulder the man took an old copper mug with most of the tinning peeled off and scooped up some water from a pail. Yurka’s teeth ached from the icy water.

The horse started off again, the drum creaked, the tub went back into the well, and the wire rope started unwinding. Yurka’s teeth ached, he wasn’t thirsty any more, but still he drank and drank. Against the future thirst.

“Thank you,” he said, handing back the empty mug.

The man put it in his bag. The drum creaked and creaked, the wire rope unwound and unwound, and there seemed no end to it, for that’s how deep the well was. Yurka would love to peep down it, but he was afraid the man would get angry, and so he didn’t.

The sheep would drink their fill, and the shepherd would drive them into the steppe. There wasn’t much grass there, but the sheep nibbled whatever there was, and moved on and on. And there was nothing else in the world there — just the steppe, the shepherd, and the flock. Day in, day out. Pa had told Yurka about it, he was a shepherd once, but didn’t like the job — it was tiring and dull with never a soul to speak to. But it didn’t seem at all bad to Yurka — you just walked and walked about. It was tough in winter, of course, what with the rain and the snow, but winter was a long way off....

“Uncle shepherd,” he said. “You wouldn’t be needing a helper, would you?”

The shepherd gave him a sidelong look.

“Yourself, you mean? You’re no helper yet, you’re another mouth to feed. And I have enough of my own.”

Yurka sat down on a stone out of the way. The wire rope was still unwinding, and then it started winding itself round the windlass and went on forever. The shepherd tipped the tub over, set it on the edge of the well, and undid the traces on the horse’s collar. The boy picked up the pail of water, leaning sideways for balance, took the horse by the reins and started for the house. The sheep were turning away from the trough, huddling into a seething dirty-grey mass, and streaming out into the steppe. The shepherd did not drive them on, but simply walked behind the flock.

The oil derricks were very clearly seen from here. A blue haze hung over the ferry. The house, the road, the poultry-yard and the estuary had vanished altogether, as though they did not exist any more, and all there was behind the not very tall hill was a spreading bluish mist that gradually changed into the blue sky. And that's how it really was — as far as he was concerned, the house and the road no longer existed. Suddenly, Yurka's heart began to ache terribly for all that he had left behind, and sank with fear of what awaited him. He jumped up and headed for the oil derrick.

It grew higher and higher but did not come any nearer, and only the framework stood out more and more clearly. Yurka felt tired, he wanted to eat and even more so to drink. He sat down to rest, but only for a moment, and walked on. Walking was better than sitting: the ground was burning hot, the sun beat down from above, and the wind here, already dry and hot, brought no relief, not like it did down on the beach. It was the heat as much as his thirst and impatience that drove Yurka on. There were people there, and that meant water. And then, supposing, who could tell? After all, Vitaly Sergeyevich did say....

The derrick thrust right into the sky. He had to crane his neck to see the top. He had seen tall houses, the tallest ever, in Yevpatoria. But they were nothing near this. Even the steel masts with the floodlights and flags on the ferry seemed low and small in comparison. A motor was working in a clapboard shed, a tin pipe running from it spurted puffs of smoke, and an oily black puddle was spreading from under it. Pipes or maybe cables snaked along the ground to the derrick. And there was a small house standing a little way off.

Yurka went to this house and peeped cautiously into the window. It wasn't a house anyone lived in, because the only things there were a table and several stools. A red-haired chap wearing glasses and a cap was sitting at this table. He was a very young chap — he had thick lips, round cheeks, and a bit of reddish fluff on his chin. There was sure to be drinking water there, but Yurka did not dare to go in and ask because the thick-lipped chap was scowling angrily, chewing on the end of his dead cigarette and writing quickly with a fountain pen.

Yurka went back to the derrick. The base was raised above the ground, and a ramp built from thick logs led to it. Yurka did not venture any farther and sat down on the edge of this ramp. The lower part of the derrick had planking on three sides. Standing to the right and left were some kind of machines and huge wooden drums with thick cable wound on them. A great big hook hung on black, greasy cables from the very top of the derrick, and directly under it was a squared beam stuck into a round

table. The beam and the table revolved with such terrific speed that you couldn't see that the beam was squared. The din made even the ramp on which Yurka was sitting shudder and jump. Yurka's head began to ache from this din, or maybe from hunger. Two men in overalls stood beside one of the machines, doing nothing, just looking now and again at the white dials on them. Yurka's throat was getting more and more parched, but he daredn't go any nearer because of the deafening din and also because he was afraid the two in the overalls would get angry and chase him away.

The red-haired chap with the glasses went past him into the derrick. He also started watching the dials, he shouted something and someone shouted back in answer. One of the men in overalls came down the ramp and stopped beside Yurka, wiping his oily hands on cotton waste.

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Nothing. Just looking," Yurka replied, standing up.

"Where d'you come from, I mean where do you live?"

"Over there," Yurka waved in the direction of the sea.

"Run home then, this is no place for kids."

"I'm thirsty. Do you have drinking water here?"

"Come along."

They went into the little house where the red-haired chap had sat writing something. In the corner stood a pot-bellied metal cylinder. The man in the overalls pressed a small lever, and bubbly water gushed noisily into the glass. Yurka gulped down this prickly, bubbly water and asked for more.

"Who did that to you?" the man asked when Yurka had finished drinking and wiped his mouth.

"I fell down," Yurka said, and blushed.

"You've a tricky way of falling, hitting all sides at once. Oh well, that's your affair. Run home now."

"Uncle, couldn't I stay here? As an apprentice. Or a sweep or something.... I'd do anything you said."

The man looked at Yurka attentively.

"Had trouble at home and decided to take a runout powder, is that it?"

Yurka stared at his toes and made no reply.

"We just don't have any work for minors. The drill foreman—you saw him, the chap wearing glasses—even he is an engineer, a man with a higher education. If it's as bad as all that, why don't you go to town and enroll in a trade school? You'll get trained in some skill and be able to stand on your own two feet...."

Yurka turned to go.

“Wait a minute, you’re hungry, I bet.” Yurka gave an embarrassed shrug. “Here, take my lunch, it’s left over.”

Having gone a few steps from the house, Yurka unwrapped the newspaper package and found an outsized sausage sandwich. He decided to eat half of it and save the rest, but the sausage tasted so wonderful and he was so hungry, that he couldn’t stop and as he walked on he ate it all. And now he was thirsty again. Funny thing, at home where water was there for the asking he drank little and rarely, and here he wanted to drink all the time. Should he go back to the derrick? He had walked so far away that the rusty-brown framework appeared bluish once more. And what was the use anyway? It seemed that even Vitaly Sergeyevich was not always right or did not speak the whole truth.... “It’s all for you....” It wasn’t at all. What good did it do him that they were looking for oil, that they had found oil or were going to find it? It had nothing to do with him. And it would be the same all over again at the ferry. He could already see the wisps of blue smoke floating over it. There, too, machines were raising a din, and people were working. All right, they would build a town. And to him they would say: kids have no business here....



9

It was long past noon, the sweltering street was deserted and the only living creatures there were the ducks wallowing in the stagnant water of the ditch. Hiding behind the water tank beside the well, Yurka bided his time and kept a close watch on the street. The general store was not far from the well, and Pa or Ma were quite likely to turn up. It was a good thing that the well was at the end of the village and its only street could be kept under observation down the whole length. A lock hung on the door of the general store, and there was not a soul about. Yurka came out of hiding, and drank thirstily from the water pipe. His tired legs ached, there was a burning sensation in the soles of his feet, and he sat down for a while in the shade

behind the water tank. He had another drink of water and left Lomovka, going round the outskirts. He crossed the road and, walking between the barley field and the vineyard, went down to the sea. The danger of running into Pa in Grokhovka was even greater, and so he decided to come there from the sea when it was dark. He walked along the shore to the spot from where it was no more than two kilometres to Grokhovka if you took the short cut. The sun was setting but it was a long time till dark. Yurka had a dip, sprawled on the hot sand to dry and, overcome by weariness, fell fast asleep.

“Hey!” A voice roared above him.

Yurka leapt to his feet. He was facing Roman, Pa’s one-legged pal. Yurka grabbed his clothes and bolted.

“Hey, why did you get the wind up?” Roman called out.

Yurka looked over his shoulder and stopped: there was no one with Roman.

“You got the jumps or something? Are you scared of me?”

“Naw.... I thought....”

There was no one else on the beach. The sun had gone down behind the cliff, so it was going to be dark any minute now. Yurka did not know he had slept so long.

“You thought!” Roman said. “Your legs work faster than your head: you run first, and think next.”

Roman was almost sober, and Pa was nowhere in sight. Yurka began to put on his clothes.

“Hold on a sec,” Roman said. “Can you swim? And dive? My hook has got caught, dive for it, there’s a good boy....”

Roman’s belongings — coat, bag, and his battered mess-tin — lay on the beach a few metres away. A short stick was stuck in the wet sand, and from it the fishing line ran away into the sea. Yurka picked it up and, passing it through his fingers, went into the water. The shore was hollowed out here, the water came up to Yurka’s neck, he swam stroking with one arm and then took a deep breath and dived. He might have reached the bottom if he hadn’t been holding on to the line, but he was afraid to let go of it as it was already dark in the water, and stroking with one arm he couldn’t make it. He came up and swam to the shore.

“No luck? Oh, blast it, I’ll have to go in myself.”

Roman unhitched his wooden leg, took off his clothes and hopped to the water. He swam with strong, beautiful strokes, moving much faster than he did on solid ground. He got out of the water on his hands and knees, wound up his line, cast it once more, and then hopped back to where he left his clothes.

Yurka stared in horror at his hacked up, purple stump.

“Not very pretty, is it?” Roman asked. “There it is, brother. Once there was a brave and handsome sailor, and now it’s just eternal glory and one and a half legs.” He put on his clothes, but from the way he twitched his shoulders he was obviously feeling pretty chilled. “D’you want a drink?”

Yurka shook his head.

“Good, don’t start. But I wouldn’t give you any anyway, there’s little enough for me.”

He took out a bottle with a rag stopper from his bag, tipped back his head and poured half of the cloudy liquid down his throat as if it were a funnel, then brought out a piece of bread, sniffed it, and put it away again.

“Maybe you’re hungry, are you?” he asked, intercepting Yurka’s glance. “Here, eat it.”

He pinched off a bit of crust, and gave the rest of the bread to Yurka.

“Where did you lose your leg?” Yurka asked, stuffing the bread into his mouth.

“In Yevpatoria, in the landing operation.”

Roman took out the bottle again, tipped back his head and poured the rest of the cloudy liquid down his throat.

“The man who camped at our place got drowned,” Yurka told him. “Remember, he came in his Volga once to Alka’s basement?”

Roman gave him a bleary-eyed look and made no response.

“Do you know where Senka-Angel lives?” Yurka asked.

“The driver?” Roman said, and nodded.

“You wouldn’t know if he has a Yulivanna staying at his place?”

Instead of answering, Roman said:

“Look here, Zhorka....”

“Why d’you keep calling me Zhorka when I’m Yurka!”

“What’s the difference?” Roman looked at him dully. “Look here, you go and collect whatever you find, we’ll start a fire, I’m shivering....”

Fuel was difficult to find in the thickening darkness, and there was never anything worthwhile here — just sticks, cane, and dried sea-nettle. Yurka gathered a pile of this rubbish, and Roman very quickly and cleverly got a fire going, and held out his hands to warm them. The darkness around them became pitch-black at once.

“You see,” Yurka said. “He drowned, and she was left. And no one knows where she is now. Senka took her away in the lorry.”

Roman was drunk, his face had become bloated, he stared stupidly at the fire and suddenly started hollering his favourite song.

Yurka got up.

"Look here, bring some more, you didn't collect enough," Roman told him.

Yurka wanted to slip away because it was time to go to Grokhovka before people had gone to bed there, but he felt ashamed of himself: Roman had given him all the bread he had, and he wanted to desert him. How could Roman walk about the beach with his one good leg and collect fuel?

Yurka had to go farther down the beach now because he had already gathered everything that would burn. His eyes had become accustomed to the darkness, and he easily distinguished the darker line of driftwood on the pale sand. He collected an armful and turned back. The fire, glowing like a little red star, burnt brighter the nearer he came to it. He could now see the circle of light on the sand, Roman sitting there, and the reflection of the fire on the clayey cliff. And suddenly he heard the thud of a galloping horse. Yurka dropped the fuel, dashed to the cliff and hid behind a ledge. Could Grandpa have given Pa his horse, and Pa had traced him down here? Or was it the militia looking for him? No, the militiaman rode a motorcycle, he had no horse....

The thudding stopped abruptly and a frontier guard rode into the circle of light.

"Who're you? Why did you light this fire?"

Roman lifted his head.

"To warm myself."

"Put it out!"

"Like hell I will!"

The frontier guard dismounted and started shovelling sand over the dying fire with his feet. The fire smoked for a bit and went out.

"Is there anyone with you?" the frontier guard asked.

"No one," Roman muttered and then, as an afterthought, said: "There's a youngster here...."

"What youngster?"

"Why, a local youngster, Zhorka Nechayev, he lives at the fortieth kilometre...."

A piercing beam of light cleaved the darkness and ran over the beach, first to the left and then to the right. Yurka flattened himself against the cliff and held his breath. He never thought that a pocket flashlight could give such a strong beam and reach so far.

"He bolted," Roman said. "Got scared of you."

"Never mind, he can't get away from us," the frontier guard said and put out his flashlight. "Collect your stuff, and come with me."

"What the hell for?"

"You'll tell us what you lit that fire for."

"How far can I hop on my one leg?"

"Don't bluster. When you were in the service were you scared of blusterers? Well, I'm not afraid of you either. Come on."

"But I live here, I'm Roman Zaruba, everybody knows me.... And you know me too!"

"Sure I know you," the frontier guard said in a bored voice. "But rules are rules."

"What a hero, he caught a foreign spy! Why, I shed my blood for this land, I lost my leg here!"

"That's past history, and now you've broken the law and must hold answer."

"I'm not coming!"

"You are. Get a move on!"

Cursing furiously, Roman put on his coat, picked up his bag and with his wooden leg getting stuck in the sand at every step hobbled down the beach. The frontier guard got on his horse and rode at a walk behind Roman. Yurka waited until he could no longer hear the thudding of the horse's hoofs and Roman's cursing, and then, crouching without himself knowing why, ran away.

Grokhovka was out of the question now. Escape was all he must think of. Away from the beach, away from this place. They'd find him here in two ticks. The frontier guards were not Ma and Pa, they had horses and motorcycles, and maybe police dogs, too.... How could he have forgotten that it was against the law to light fires on the shore at night! He knew it, and Roman knew it too. Sure, Roman was drunk, but what about himself? Maybe they wouldn't do anything to him when they caught him, but they'd let his father know, that's for sure, and send him back home....

Yurka ran all the way to the vineyard, but once there he slowed down to a walk. In case of trouble he could easily hide in the rows of the grapevines which looked black in the darkness, and no one was guarding the vineyard yet because the grapes were only just setting.

The vineyard ended at the dirt road, and Yurka turned right along it. To the left of him, beyond the highroad, he could see the faraway lights of Lomovka twinkling here and there. Cars were on their way to the ferry. Yurka stepped out of their way and did not raise his hand—he couldn't hope that one of them would stop, and besides he had no money to pay for the ride anyway.

The white-washed walls of their house stood out dimly against the darkness ahead. Yurka listened tensely for any sound that might come

from there, and peered hard. All was quiet, and the eerily glittering windows were dark. Zhuchka came bouncing to him in a shaggy black ball. Yurka patted her head, and she wiggled and jumped trying to lick his face. The windows of their room were dark. Yurka stood there awhile, looking at the house and at the tamarisk knoll behind it where life had seemed so good to him only a short time ago. A lump rose in his throat and something tickled his eyes. He turned, and went on his way. Zhuchka gave a small puzzled yelp.

“Go home,” he told her in a low voice. “Home!”

Zhuchka wagged her tail and trotted home. The road running to the lilac glow over the ferry showed vaguely in the darkness.

The pile drivers had stopped work for the night, and a few electric bulbs were burning beside them. Small floodlights were trained on the mooring wall padded with old tyres. No sound of pile drivers or bulldozers came from the other side either. A dredger, flooded with light, stood right in the middle of the channel. The scoops, streaming water, jangling and crackling, crawled up as if they were themselves the steps of a moving staircase, and at the top they turned over and dumped the mud into the barge sitting low in the water next to the dredger.

More and more lorries were driving up. The drivers throttled down their engines, switched off the headlights, and got together for a smoke while waiting for the ferry-boat. Yurka slipped into the shadow and, careful not to get in the light of the parking lamps, made his way to the end lorry in the queue. There was no one in the cab. Yurka jumped, grabbed hold of the side and climbed up the wheel into the back of the lorry. It was free of a load. Yurka went and lay down up front where the driver could not see him through the barred window at the back of the cab. Almost immediately the cab was lit up by a trembling light that grew stronger by the second—this meant that another car was coming. The light became piercingly bright and then was turned off—the car had come right up and stopped. More and more cars lined up behind Yurka’s—he heard them drive up and stop, and he also heard the voices of the drivers walking past. If only he could get to Yevpatoria! They wouldn’t look for him there, and if they did they wouldn’t find him soon, not before.... Before what, Yurka did not know and tried not to think about it. He did not know where to go and what to do.

The drivers were coming back, he could hear their voices. First one door and then the other were slammed shut, and a rumble of talk came from the cab. That meant that there were two men there, not the driver alone. The engine gave a roar, and the lorry, lurching over the ruts in the road, crawled forward, drove into the beam of the floodlights, then rumbled over

the gang planks, and lined up on the ferry-boat where all the lights were blazing. The engines were throttled down again, but there were engines working under the deck and they sent shudders through both the deck and the lorries on it. Yurka could see the glassed-in captain's bridge and the captain wearing a black service cap with the crab-like badge. Now, if Yurka could see the captain, the captain might also see him and tell the driver, but the captain either did not see him or else he didn't give a hang that there was someone lying in the back of a lorry, and he was only there to see that the cars drove on and off the ferry-boat in proper order.

Yurka's lorry drove off at a crawl, jolted and bounced across the floodlit construction site, came out on the asphalt road where it was dark in comparison, and began to gather speed. Yurka got up and sat in the corner, huddling against the back of the cab as before. The sea was left far to one side. The lorry's twin shafts of light groped over the road ahead, swinging a little, and far in front of them a red rear-light winked and went out. The cars behind could not keep up with them, and now there were only the dim stars overhead, the transparent feelers of the headlights, and the road flying under their wheels. He wished they would ride on like this forever, all day and night, so long as he got as far away from home as he could....

Lights showed in the distance, first solitary ones and then a whole skyful of them. The lights scattered ever wider and there were more and more of them, until suddenly they all vanished in the dust when the lorry turned off on the earth road. Once they were back on the asphalt, the lights rushed towards them again and crowded all around. The lorry made a turn, went into reverse, and backed as far as the pavement, bumping into it with its rear wheels. The doors of the cab slammed one after the other. Yurka waited, then swung a leg over the side and jumped down. This was the square in front of the railway station building. Granny's house was quite near: you had to walk two blocks, turn down a short narrow street, and then a blind alley. There were still a lot of people about — vacationists, he guessed, because they always stayed out till late. There were no street-lamps in the blind alley, and only one window showed a light. Yurka walked into the yard. The window in Granny's room was open, and the light seeped through the cheesecloth curtain. Yurka went straight to the window and the next moment sprang back into the shadows — Ma was there, 'gabbling and screaming. So she'd come for him, she had run him down to earth! Yurka backed away, out of the gate, and scooted down the blind alley. He had set so much store by Granny.... But what could Granny do? She was Pa's mother, so naturally she'd be at one with them. All of them were at one.

Yurka drank from a water hydrant in the lane at the entrance to the market, and then followed the tram line to the public garden. He felt dead-beat, but he couldn't sit on the grass because the narrow little lawns, stuck round with fancy tiles, were bristling with flowers, and as for the benches, there wasn't a vacant one! Couples were sitting three or four to a bench, all squashed together and whispering goofy love stuff. At last he found a bench with only one couple sitting on it. Sprawling half over the bench was a fellow with long-uncut hair and narrow black trousers on his wide-planted legs. A girl with made-up eyes hung on his shoulder, hugging his neck with both arms. They did not speak. A loud quacking, grunting and wailing came from a black-and-white box which the fellow wore on a strap round his neck. Yurka's legs were buckling under. He sat down on the farthest edge of the bench.

"Scram," the fellow said.

He did not turn his head, so Yurka wasn't sure it was meant for him.

"Are you deaf?" the fellow turned to him now. "Hop it, damn you."

Yurka got up. The girl rubbed her cheek against the fellow's shoulder, snuggling up more comfortably, and went dead again. The black-and-white box grunted and wailed.

People were singing on another bench. There were two girls and three fellows. One of the fellows was strumming a guitar and half-singing, half-talking in a sad voice:

You are carving, but what you are carving, you yourself don't know...?

One of the other fellows joined in:

"I am carving, it's buttocks I'm carving, it's buttocks I'm carving, I know!"

The girls giggled.

"Stop it," the third fellow said. "Parodying fools and scoundrels is a waste of breath. They're too cocksure to recognise themselves."

"All right," said the fellow with the guitar. "No more parodies. Let's go to sleep."

He rose, and the others got up and went off with him. Yurka dashed to the bench before someone else grabbed it. But no one came to sit on it, the other benches were also being vacated one after the other, and soon Yurka was alone in the garden. Straight in front of him were the brightly lit windows of the lemonade and icecream booth where they once went with Vitaly Sergeyevich, and behind it loomed the mosque, crowned with a dome. Yurka took one more look about him, and stretched out full length on the bench.

In the morning, the yard-keeper brought a hose to water the flowers and chased Yurka off. A van with the word BREAD on it spelled out in huge

letters was parked outside the bakery and trayfuls of fresh loaves were being unloaded. Yurka tried not to look at them. He followed the tram line again, keeping away from the market place and Granny's house so as not to run into Ma. At a crossroad, the tram turned left, the cobblestone street ended here and a smooth asphalt road began. Shrubs and trees, grey from the dust, drooped limply on either side of the glistening asphalt. A high, sandstone garden wall stretched endlessly along the right side of the road, and you could hear the wash of the sea somewhere beyond it. Yurka stopped for a little beside a filling station to have a look. Cars came slowly in single file to the red pumps, sucked thirstily from a thick hose and, cheering up, hurried off and got lost at once in the endless stream of cars which, snorting and lispig, sped along the asphalt.

The high wall which, it turned out, enclosed the oil depot went straight down to the sea, a glimpse of which showed in the slit between the wall and a small wooden shack. You could hear a kerosene stove humming inside this shack. Curtains fluttered in the open windows of the little house next to it. Behind it there were more houses, all of them as small and squat. Actually, there was no end to them. Yurka's tired feet ached terribly, and he flopped down on the prickly, dusty grass growing along the sandstone wall. A grey Moskvich car drove into the yard and stopped in front of one of the houses. A woman with bobbed hair appeared in the window, and in the very next second came out on the porch, smiling in welcome. The owner of the Moskvich locked the door, tugged at the handle to make sure, and suddenly saw Yurka.

"I say, laddie, do you live here?"

"No."

"Well, it doesn't matter. D'you want to make some money?"

Yurka leapt to his feet eagerly. "Look after the car, see that no one touches anything."

The owner of the Moskvich and the bobbed-haired woman went into the house. Their voices reached Yurka, and they sounded ever louder, ever angrier. Yurka guessed that they were quarrelling. The black and white number plate began like Vitaly Sergeyevich's with MO, meaning Moscow. Two boys, no bigger than Mitka, came to stare at the car. Yurka shooed them away. There was nobody else to keep away from the car, and inside the house the angry voices were still buzzing. Yurka squatted in the short shadow cast by the wall. The car owner and the woman came out.

"When will you come again?" she asked.

"I don't know."

"Then I'll leave!"

"As you like."

The car door slammed, the Moskvich backed a little and swung round. Yurka jumped up and waved, but the owner of the Moskvich did not notice him, and drove off. The woman went back into the house, and Yurka continued on his way.

An arched gate with the sign "Pension" came in sight on the other side of the road. Yurka did not know what the word meant, and went up closer to see. Behind the shrubbery, lots of cars of different makes and colours were parked in two rows, facing each other. The space between was taken up by tents, proper canvas ones, or simply blankets and stuff stretched on poles. Untidy bedding showed from inside some of the cars or was laid right on the dusty ground. Grownups and children, none of them fully dressed, sat or lolled on this bedding. Kerosene stoves, the kind you had to pump, hummed busily, and the noiseless kind were smoking away. Shirts, trunks and towels were hung up to dry on lengths of rope and wire. The campers were all talking, laughing and shouting, and from a round box fixed to a telegraph pole a metallic voice bellowed the song: "*Where the river, river Biryusa...*" outyelling all the others. A smell of petrol and cooking came from the shrubbery.

Yurka crossed back to the other side of the road. The squat little houses which had seemed to have no end, ended here. Low benches stood in rows under an awning stretched on tall metal pipes, and the place was simply teeming with bodies that were all but naked. Further along the highway there were no shrubs on either side, and the asphalt looked oily and pitch-black as it streamed away. You could hardly see the beach between the highway and the sea for all the cars parked there, for the white and yellow tents, and the swarms of people. Yurka turned back.

He came to an awning under which there were no benches to lie on, and instead there were small metal tables and chairs standing on a stone platform, covered with asphalt. People came here to eat, and Yurka went up closer to watch them.

More people came all the time. They sat down at the small tables and some started eating right away, unpacking paper packages or taking stuff from their bags, while others lined up at a small window, put the plates pushed at them from the window on tin trays and carried them to their tables. On the plates they left the remains of semolina, macaroni, and pieces of bread. Yurka looked at the food, but did not dare take anything.

Dishwashers came and cleared all the plates and bread.

The rush seemed to be over, less and less people came, the dishwashers did not clear the tables as quickly, more and more of the tables remained cluttered with plates, and finally Yurka worked up the courage. He went up the steps to the platform and cautiously sat down at the nearest table.

Nobody shouted at him. Some macaroni, as thick as a finger, floated in a thick brown gravy on one of the plates; on another was a smear of semolina; and on a third lay a whole slice and half a slice of bread. Yurka grabbed the bread and with it wiped the plate clean of the cold and now slippery semolina. The macaroni were underdone, but he gulped them down without chewing for fear that he'd be kicked out before he was full. A plateful of macaroni stood on the next table, but before Yurka could get at it, one of the dishwashers came and carried it off. A family—mother, father and a small boy—rose from a table not far away, leaving behind them an untouched plate of semolina and several slices of bread.

Yurka slipped across, gulped down the semolina, grabbed the bread and stuffed it in his pocket.

"What are you pinching? Turn out your pockets!" a woman's voice screamed behind him.

People sitting at the nearby tables turned round to look. The dishwasher pushed her hand into Yurka's pocket and turned it out. The bread fell on the floor. Yurka's face burnt and he could not raise his eyes. He knew that everyone was looking at him, at the *thief*.

"Surely you wouldn't grudge this boy a piece of bread?" a man said.

"I'm not taking orders from you!" the dishwasher retorted. "First he takes a piece of bread, next he'll pinch the spoons, and we have to account for them!"

"But he hasn't pinched any spoons, it's just some bread," a woman said.

"They grudge the leftovers because they take pailfuls home to fatten their hogs," a third voice joined in.

"And what business is it of yours?" the dishwasher screamed. "Hogs have to be fed too. I earn these leftovers in the sweat of my brow, I'd like you to know!"

"People come first anyway," the first man said.

"Let their parents feed them, these hoodlums of theirs! The brats are their doing, so let them feed them!"

"I say, come here!"

Yurka looked at the speaker from a corner of his eye. This bald man wearing a singlet, now swept up all the bread there was on his table and held it out to Yurka. "Take it," he said.

As Yurka snatched at the bread he noticed a little girl sitting beside the bald man and saw the frightened look in her eyes. He dashed out.

"And mind I never see you here again!" the dishwasher shouted after him.

Yurka ran on and on until he found himself at the stone wall of the oil depot once again. His pockets bulged. Eight slices of bread was no

joke — almost half a loaf, and not black bread either, but the good grey kind Ma brought as a rare treat from town....

None of the passers-by he asked knew where the trade school was. They were here on vacation for the most part, and the drivers sitting in the parked cars did not know either. Yurka saw two militiamen, but rather than ask them he crossed to the other side of the street and walked with a brisk, purposeful step. He only found the trade school when the day was almost done. It was closed.

“What d’you want?” the caretaker came out and asked. “There’s no one here, everyone’s doing practice in Saki.”

“When do new pupils get enrolled?” Yurka asked.

“In the school, you mean?” the caretaker was bored and glad of a chance to talk to someone, even a kid. “Why, it’s a long story, and enrolment will not be till autumn. So in the meantime, have a good time, enjoy your freedom. And in the autumn collect the papers you need and come again....”

What papers? What papers could he have?

He spent the rest of the day loafing about the streets, avoiding those places where he might run into Ma — supposing she hadn’t gone home yet? — and sitting on benches. He went to the city beach — the way to it was from the public garden — but there was no hope of shouldering or wriggling his way to the sea through the throng of people who stood, sat or lay there, packed like sardines. He came back for a swim when it was growing dark and he had the beach all to himself. He decided to stay there for the night and sleep on one of the low benches. A cleaning woman chased him away early in the morning, and he tramped back to town.

He finished the bread he had left, and was soon hungry again. Food was everywhere, at every step, mountains of food.... On display in the windows of the groceries were all sorts of neatly stacked tins, huge hams, and chains of sausages. Yurka knew that they were not real, that the hams and sausages were made of some kind of paper and painted. But they made his mouth water all the same, and he turned away. Turning away did not help, there was no avoiding the sight of food, it dogged him, dangled before his eyes. The bakeries were bursting with dark square loaves, round white ones with a golden crust, and buns sprinkled with sugar. The confectionaries teased him with their packages of biscuits and cookies, trays of cream cakes, and great glass jars brimming with sweets. Meat pies, which tasted wonderful for all that they looked like a kid’s squashed old slipper, were sold at every street corner. Hanging from hooks at the butcher’s were legs of mutton, whole sides of beef with the ribs showing like fangs, and laid out on the counter were plump, neatly plucked chickens. And at the

greengrocer's — bunches and bunches of carrots, raddishes, and sacks and sacks of potatoes.... And everywhere people were eating. All the time. Wherever Yurka looked he saw people eating—in cafes, in restaurants, in houses, in the street, at the market place, on the beach, sitting, standing or walking, people chewed and chewed. They were eating their breakfast, their lunch, their dinner, they were taking a snack, a bite, they were taking the edge off, they were wolfing the food, they were stuffing themselves....

His hopes that he'd find a rouble or perhaps even a three-rouble note dropped by someone were fast dwindling. Nobody dropped any money. His only find was a twenty-kopek coin which had gone black for some reason. Yurka spat on it, rubbed it on the ground till it became shiny again and ran to the bakery.

"What are you trying to palm off on me? Think I won't notice?" the saleswoman shouted at him.

"Why, what's wrong with it?" Yurka asked in sincere amazement.

"It's an old coin, gone out of circulation, as if you didn't know! You're starting good and early, aren't you?"

Nobody lost money in the street, dropped pies or threw away bread. Yurka tried earning some money. He approached several women who staggered out of the grocery with bursting shopping bags that must weigh a ton, and very politely said:

"Auntie, let me carry it for you...."

The aunties sent him about his business or took a tighter hold on their bags and glared at the snatch thief. Yurka had never stolen anything in his life, and was afraid to steal.

He went down to the beach again for the night, but this time he examined all the benches and dug in all the rubbish cans. He found chicken bones picked almost clean, wrapped in greasy newspaper, and crusts of bread hardened into stone in the heat. He sucked them slowly to make them last longer.

People came down to the beach so early in the morning that they almost beat the cleaning women to it. They came loaded with blankets, mats, and whole bagfuls of food. They grabbed the benches, which was why they came early, and started eating at once. A fat woman, wobbly like jelly, opened her bag and started stuffing food into the mouth of a small pudgy-faced boy. He turned his face away and twisted his mouth.

"Eat, or I'll give it to that boy over there," the fat woman said, and the threat worked. Pudgy-face stole a look at Yurka and began to eat.

At the bakery door stood a bent and wrinkled old woman. She bowed to everyone who came out and whined:

"Spare a poor old woman a crust!"

Yurka came and stood beside her. Almost everybody bought loaves, but some bought so many grams and the makeweights they gave to the old woman. A few of the people did, that is. More often than not people dropped a three- or a five-kopek coin into her hand. Yurka was ashamed to hold out his hand and bow, and just did not know how to whine. And so no one gave him anything.

The old woman glanced round at him several times and when the coast was clear she hissed at him:

“What are you sticking around here for?”

“I’m hungry,” Yurka replied.

“Aren’t there other bakeries? This is *my* bakery, I stand here every morning! Here, take this, and go away...”

She gave him a handful of makeweights. What lovely fresh bread! And how little there was of it....

Yurka’s head ached all the time, and now he had spells of dizziness. He would sit down wherever he was when it came on and take a long rest. He had all the time in the world.... Should he go to Granny’s? She’d give him a square meal, then put him under lock and key, and home he’d go. It wasn’t that she was mean or anything, she was strict, and even Pa was meek as a lamb in her presence. No, nothing doing, better rough it like this, better starve to death than go home to get beaten up again and, what’s worse, be laughed at for running away from home and not getting anywhere....



10

The days dragged on. Yurka lost count of them or, rather, he did not count them. All his time was taken up by one pressing need—to find something to eat. The memory of what had happened back home troubled him less and less often, and when he did remember, it seemed so very long

ago, and only his hatred did not abate—it was *they* who brought him to this, made him what he was now....

He had already worked out a routine—first thing in the morning he went to the bus terminal. It was always crowded there, somebody was sure to be eating something, and if Yurka was lucky the eater would throw the leftovers into the rubbish can or into the corner behind it. After that he went to the public garden past the food shops, the bakeries especially. He had not learnt to beg, but people coming out sometimes dropped their makeweights and did not like to pick them up from the ground, so Yurka got them. At the market place he tried not to look about him at the heap-ed counters and kept his eyes on the ground—a squashed raddish, a carrot, sweet peas in a pod, anything would do. He might wash the vegetables he found, or just rub the dirt off and eat them. From the market place he went to the railway station. Not into the building, of course, where someone always told him to get out—the porters or one of the bad-tempered uniformed women. But there were people enough waiting for their train outside the building, sitting on their bags or crowding round the booths where pies, sandwiches and buns were sold. Many of the waiting passengers bought stuff to eat on the train and were no use to Yurka, but some ate their sandwiches right there and occasionally threw a crust away.

One day Yurka was doing his beat near the booth with the sign: “Food for the Journey”. A woman was stuffing the things she bought into her shopping net, and a little girl stood beside her munching a cheese sandwich. She wasn’t hungry and, thrusting out her lips, just rolled the food lazily around in her mouth. Noticing that Yurka was watching her, she stopped chewing altogether and gaped at him, open-mouthed. Yurka turned away.

Taxis rolled up one after another, and pedestrians, lugging suitcases, hurried along the pavement or cut straight across the wide thoroughfare. A loud mumbo-jumbo came from the loudspeaker. Something familiar flickered past in the crowd of passengers, but Yurka did not know what it was and turned to watch the little girl again. Her mother gripped her by the hand and hurried off to the station building. Following them with his eyes to the door, Yurka caught sight of that familiar something again. It was *her* dress. Yurka dashed forward. He wedged himself into the crush in the door but there was no breaking through the solid wall of people before him. Elbows, suitcases and bags squashed him in from all sides. The solid stream of passengers squeezed inside at last, moved across the hall and out through the doors to the platforms, and only here did it begin to thin out a little and spread in different directions. A gleaming train that was as long as the

platform was taking on passengers. People with happy, smiling faces called out through the open transoms to the friends who were seeing them off; passengers swarmed up the steps into the coaches, while others hurried up or down the platform, doubling up from the weight of their bags and looking anxiously at the coach numbers.

Yurka turned left and plunged into the noisy, bustling crowd. People pushed him, and he pushed people himself, taking no notice of what anyone said to him and searching for her with his eyes. He came to the end of the train, to the last, fourteenth coach. Yulivanna wasn't there. He ran back, still hoping, although in his heart of hearts he did not believe he would find her.

Going was easier now. The last of the passengers were boarding, and the train attendants were taking their little yellow flags from their cases. People who were seeing off friends were still bustling about, getting in Yurka's way, waving and shouting across to the train. Yurka ran as fast as he could. The train attendants were going up the steps of their coaches, keeping the passengers back. Yurka reached the first passenger coach after the luggage van, the train started without a sound, and he saw her. Yulivanna was looking over the transom and waving with so slight a movement of her wrist that you'd hardly notice. Yurka tore off his cap and waved madly. Yulivanna took no notice of him. She was waving to someone else. Yurka swung round. Not two steps away stood Senka-Angel and, with his arm raised, he fluttered his hand in a farewell gesture. The train gathered speed, and the wheels clicked away over the joints. Senka now saw Yurka.

"You here, soldier?" he said. "Well, hello, hello!"

"She left, and I didn't get to see her."

"Yeah, she left," Senka said. "It was misery for her here, how much more could she take.... I say, what are you doing here?" Yurka shrugged awkwardly. "What happened, why are you so scrawny, you're sick or something?"

"No, it's not that," Yurka said. "I ran away from home. For good."

"What d'you mean, for good?"

"That time you came with Yulivanna, after you left I told them what a mean bunch they were.... Well, they gave me a beating, and I ran away...."

"Wait a minute, but that was about ten days ago, wasn't it? Where were you all that time?"

Yurka did not answer.

"I see. No wonder you're so scrawny. Come along."

Senka took him to the station restaurant. Yurka went shy when it came

to sitting down at a table, but Senka pulled him by the hand, Yurka sat down, suddenly remembered his cap, pulled it off and thrust it under himself. The restaurant was empty except for two parties of red-faced, loudly talking men, who had a lot of beer bottles standing on their tables.

"What can you give us to eat that doesn't take waiting?" Senka asked the waiter.

"Meat balls. With macaroni."

"Bring the meat balls," Senka said and, glancing at Yurka, added: "Make it two."

"Maybe just bread..." Yurka whispered.

"Sure, bread. The more the better. And for me..." He made some sign with his fingers, the waiter nodded understandingly and went to bring their order.

Yurka swallowed the macaroni without chewing them, choking and pushing them into his mouth with pieces of bread. Senka sat rolling breadballs and not looking at him. Yurka was glad Senka wasn't watching him. He was ashamed of the greediness with which he ate, but could not help it. He ate the meat balls last, after he had wiped the plate clean with a piece of bread.

"Well, feeling chippier?" Senka asked.

"I'm full!" Yurka said, and passed his thumb across his throat. He felt he was about to burst.

The waiter brought a small decanter filled halfway with some colourless liquid and a huge glass. Senka poured the liquid into the glass, and it all went in.

"Here's to a good life, eh?" Senka said.

He drank the whole glass up without stopping for breath, put some mustard on a crust of bread and popped it into his mouth. Yurka watched him goggle-eyed.

"But you don't drink!" he said.

"Did you really think I was an angel?" Senka grinned. "Only in parts. All right, let's go, there's nothing else for us to do here."

Yurka looked furtively about him, swept up the bread remaining on the plate, and stuffed it into his pocket. Senka pretended not to notice.

"By the look of you I can guess what you ate. But where did you sleep?"

"On benches in the park or on the beach," Yurka replied.

"Not bad! Are you going to sleep on the beach in the winter too?"

"I wanted to go to trade school," Yurka said. "But it's not until autumn. And you must have papers. At the boarding-school, too, they ask for papers...."

"Everyone's stuck on those damn papers, stuck down like flies on fly paper," Senka said thoughtfully.

They walked to Senka's lorry and, opening the cab door, Senka said: "Climb in, let's go."

"Go where?" Yurka backed away in fright. "I'm not going home."

"I'm not taking you home. We're going to my place. And then we'll think of something."

Yurka gladly climbed into the cab.

"Aren't you afraid to drive?" he asked. "You've been drinking."

"We've no traffic inspectors where I live, no one to go sniffing my breath. I'm not drunk, am I? What's a glass anyway, and I needed it...."

Senka drove carefully around the railway station and turned right, heading for Chernomorsk.

Yurka was shy to ask and hoped that Senka would tell him himself, but as Senka did not speak he did ask at last:

"How are things ... at their place?"

He could not bring himself to say at "our" place, and he no longer wanted to.

"I don't know, I haven't been."

"Listen," Yurka said, remembering suddenly. "She didn't have any money, you know, Yulivanna didn't, so who lent it her?"

"Not everyone's a bastard, there are decent people too," Senka replied.

"Was it you?"

Senka did not have to answer. The lorry was smoothly rolling over the asphalt now that the bumpy stretch of the road was behind. Yurka was food-drunk and, slumping against the back of the seat, fell asleep. He only woke up when they came to the ferry and the lorry started bouncing and jolting over the ruts. Yurka remembered everything before he was quite awake, and suddenly, frightened by the awful thought that the bread he had put in his pocket had dropped out on the way, clutched at his bulging pocket and was wide awake. Senka glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, but did not say anything.

Yurka did not fall asleep any more. He peered tensely at the approaching house and, though he did not see anyone there, he slid down the seat and bent low when the lorry approached it.

"Safety first," Senka chuckled. "But there's no one there."

Yurka shamefacedly sat up and looked out of the window. There was no one about in the yard or out in the road.

Senka drove straight into the wide open gates of his yard.

"Go right in, go on," he gave Yurka an encouraging push. "And where's my old woman?" he shouted.

There was nobody in the kitchen and no one answered from the room.

"She's in the kitchen garden, I'll bet, or gone over to the neighbours," Senka said. "You sit down and wait here."

Yurka sat down on a stool. Senka went out. It was a kitchen like any other, and the room he could see through the open door was quite ordinary too. Nothing special. A double bed with shining balls on the iron headboard, a table covered with oilcloth.... Only it was very clean. The floor was so shiny you'd be afraid to walk on it. Not like in their room at home....

A woman walked into the kitchen followed by Senka. Yurka sprang to his feet and said:

"Good-afternoon, auntie."

"Good-afternoon," the woman replied indifferently, but Yurka thought she sounded unfriendly. Why had Senka called her an old woman when she was not really old at all?

He must have told Yurka's story to his wife while they were outside, because she did not seem surprised and did not ask him anything and went about laying the table in silence.

"Sit down, let's pitch in," Senka said.

"But I'm not hungry, I'm so full there's no more room," Yurka mumbled, too embarrassed to accept.

Room was found. The more so because the cold beet soup with sour milk was so good.

"You'd better take out your emergency stores, you won't need them now," Senka said.

Flushing, Yurka took the pieces of bread out of his pocket and laid them on the table. He wanted to eat them with his soup so as not to take any from the bread dish, but Senka's wife collected them and threw them into a large pot standing beside the stove.

"Have you put away the camp bed?" he asked his wife. "No? That's fine. Lie down, soldier, and have a snooze, I have to go and see my chief."

Yurka undressed and stretched out on the camp bed. Gosh, how soft and wonderful it felt after the park benches....

Senka's wife took Yurka's shirt, looked it over and crumpled it up.

"Take your trunks off, I'll bet they're no cleaner."

"Never mind, auntie, why should you...."

"Take them off and no backchat!"

When Yurka awoke, it was morning. His laundered and ironed trunks and shirt hung on the back of a chair.

"When will you be back?" Senka's wife was asking in the kitchen.

"Can't make it in a day," Senka replied. "A couple of days at least, and

maybe all of three.... Hello, soldier, just in time for breakfast. We'll have to eat and go."

Yurka ate his fill of the boiled potatoes and pork fat.

"It's like this," Senka said to him. "If you don't want to go home you can't stay here either, they'll find it out in no time. Right?" Yurka nodded. "I have to go to Simferopol. Ever been there? Well, you'll come with me. It's a first-rate town, Yevpatoria's nothing to equal it, not by a long shot. On the way there we'll stop at the Vinogradnoye State Farm. My sister lives there. Her husband is a heel, he skipped two years ago and left her with a kid. He's four now, there's no day nursery, and so my sister has to lock him up in the house when she goes to work. You never know what he might get up to.... See? Well, you'll stay there for a while. She'll be glad to have someone keeping an eye on the kid...."

"Gosh, I'll do everything, just everything!" Yurka said. "Just anything she says...."

"Well, we'll see how it goes.... If you get fed up and want to return home, I'll take you. No, I've a better idea. Your Pa and Ma will cool off with time, I'll find some way to talk them round, we'll get the papers you need and you'll be able to go to school at Vinogradnoye, there is a school there. I don't think they'll object, what's it to them anyway, one mouth less to feed.... Well, like the idea?"

"Like it!" Yurka cried.

"To horses, then! We must first drop in at our depot."

Once there, Senka parked and went to the smithy, leaving Yurka sitting in the cab.

Three men were already standing at the door to the basement. Hunchbacked Alka arrived, unlocked the door, and the men went in after her. Roman Zaruba came hobbling past the lorry.

"Roman! Uncle Roman!" Yurka shouted, poking his head out of the window.

Roman stopped and turned to look.

"Uncle Roman, did they just let you go, they didn't do anything?" Yurka asked.

"Why the hell should they want to keep me?" Roman's face twitched into something resembling a smile. "They brought me home too. In a car...."

Roman hobbled on, and stopped again.

"I say, Zhorka, how's your old man?"

"Why?"

"Well, the other day we had one too many and he almost conked out...."

He waited for an answer, but Yurka did not know what to say, so Roman hobbled on to the basement.

Senka came back carrying a rear spring on his shoulder and swung it over the side of the lorry. They drove past the cemetery, the vineyard, and were on the highroad. Yurka's heart missed a beat. Everything was exactly the way it was when they went to Grokhovka with Vitaly Sergeyevich: there was Daughter swishing at the flies with her tail, there were Ma and Fyodor shovelling the gravel, and there was Grandpa sitting on the ground, with his legs dangling in the ditch, and smoking. Everything was exactly the same, only Pa and Vitaly Sergeyevich weren't there.

Yurka did not hide this time but, just to be on the safe side, moved away from the window a little. Ma straightened up and glanced absently at the lorry. She did not see Yurka, but Yurka saw her well enough and wondered why her lean face looked so much leaner and older. That must be because Pa was ill. But it wasn't the first time, was it? He was always ill after a big drink. A couple of days in bed, and he'd start again.... His being in bed, and maybe sleeping, suited Yurka fine....

"Will you stop outside the house?" he asked Senka. "I'll send Slavka in to get some things, if only my jacket, because all I have is this shirt...."

"Good idea," Senka nodded. "You'll need your jacket."

A lock hung on Grandpa's door—Maximovna must have gone to Lomovka to visit her son. Nyushka was doing a wash in the shadow of the porch, with her back to the road. The door of *their* room stood wide open. Senka stopped the car, and Yurka leapt down to the ground. Zhuchka was running about the yard, rattling her chain and whimpering. No one had thought of giving her something to eat and filling her bowl with water! Oh, those kids!

Three tiny figures were running about the beach on the edge of the water, glittering with blinding sunbeams. Who'd get the jacket for him now, with all of them gone for a bathe? What if Senka didn't want to wait while he ran there for Slavka and back? Yurka took a look down the road to see if the coast was clear, bravely walked into the yard and went straight to the house. If he didn't get his jacket, he'd run away without it, Pa would never catch him. He peeped into the open door. Pa's bed was rumbled, but he wasn't in it. Was he sitting somewhere in the sun, or had he also gone down for a swim? Yurka cautiously tiptoed up the two steps, just in case. Not a sound came from the room. Yurka stepped over the threshold, and froze. Pa was sitting at the table and, holding his head high, looked straight at him.

Yurka wanted to turn and bolt, to run headlong across the yard and out to the lorry, but his feet were stuck to the floor as if Pa had nailed them down with his look. Strangely, Pa did not yell or leap up, he continued to stare as fixedly at Yurka and only his hands moved all the time. They



hurriedly slid over the table, groping for something. And there was nothing there, nothing but a pack of cigarettes. Pa's fingers touched it, felt inside, and crushed it, finding the pack empty. He seemed about to throw it away, but then smoothed it out again, dug nervously inside, and only then flung it away. And all the time he kept staring at Yurka with a tense, stony look. Why didn't he yell, why didn't he go for Yurka? Maybe he wasn't mad any more, maybe he'd forgotten everything? Not he, he'd never forget....

Pa pushed the table away from him and, with his head still held as high, went down on all fours and started groping over the floor. He'd dropped a cigarette and was looking for it, Yurka thought. But why go to all this



trouble when it was right there before his very eyes, and when there were two unopened packs lying on top of the books on the second shelf?

Yurka could not understand what was going on, but he was terribly scared. He backed away, and the floorboard gave a squeak.

“Who’s there?”

Pa jumped to his feet and listened, but he was staring at the wall now, not at Yurka.

“Is it Slavka? Mitka?” Pa asked. “I dropped a cigarette, and I can’t find it for the life of me....”

Yurka stood holding his breath, afraid to stir.

Holding his head high and stretching out his hands, Pa took a step not towards Yurka, but towards the blank wall he was staring at. He bumped into a stool, it fell down with a clatter, and he stood still.

"Children, where are you?" he asked. His voice sounded sort of desperate, almost sobbing.

Impulsively, Yurka went and picked up the cigarette and held it out to his father.

"Here," he said.

Pa turned round and, actually looking at Yurka, asked:

"Is that you, Slavka?"

"No, it's me."

"Sonny.... You came back, sonny," his voice quavered.

He came towards Yurka with his arms outstretched. Yurka gave him the cigarette, but Pa missed it and caught hold of Yurka's hand. That's how Slavka clutched at him when he was teaching him how to swim. Slavka was afraid to drown and held on to Yurka for dear life....

Pa clutched at him with one hand and with the other felt him over nervously, stroking his arm, shoulder and head.

"Sonny, you've come home.... And I can't see. I can't see at all. Not even light...."

He held on to Yurka and stared over his head, into space.

"Maybe they'll cure you yet?"

"No, your mother took me to Chernomorsk and Yevpatoria," Pa said. "The doctors told her it was all up with me.... I know. The surgeon in the army hospital had warned me then: the smallest thing, and it will be all up with you...."

Tears poured from his wide-open eyes and got caught in the many-days' bristle on his shaking chin. Yurka's chin began to shake too. He clenched his teeth and led his father to the chair.

"Sit down."

Yurka pulled his hand away and his father clutched at it more desperately still.

"Don't leave me!"

"Let go, I'll give you a cigarette."

He gave him the cigarette and a box of matches. His father listened tensely to Yurka's movements and only relaxed a little when Yurka struck a match and held it for him to light his cigarette. Pa inhaled greedily.

"Just sit here," Yurka said and went to the door.

"Sonny! Where are you going, son?" Pa wailed.

Yurka walked down the porch steps. The three tiny figures were running about in the shallow water, splashing through the sunbeams.... The kids....

They'd be pushed around and bullied to death now. They'd grow up like weeds, untended.... Ma had to shoulder everything alone. And what could she do alone? And Pa would be forever floundering in those four walls, bumping into everything and falling....

As he walked to the road his every step was such an effort to make, one might think he had been walking for days without a halt or was wearing the leaden boots of that diver at the ferry.

Senka leaned across from his seat and opened the cab door for Yurka.

"He wouldn't let you take your jacket?" he asked.

"He can't see," Yurka said.

"Can't see what?"

"Anything. Anything at all. He's gone blind. See?"

Senka's eyebrows went up and he gave a low whistle.

"The hell you say!" He was silent for a moment, and then asked: "Through vodka, is it?"

Yurka shrugged.

"What have you decided to do?"

"You see, Ma has to shoulder it all now.... And there are the kids.... And he, stone-blind...."

"You mean you've changed your mind?" Narrowing his eyes to slits, Senka looked down the road which had turned quite white from the heat.

"Maybe you're right.... So long, then. I'll stop by on my way back."

He slammed the door shut. The lorry started with a roar and was off. A tip-up lorry came bouncing and rattling down the road, it overtook Senka's, then another one flew past, and then more and more of them. The cars raced along, angrily hooting their horns, urging one another on, and there was no telling if they were chasing something and could not catch up, or if they were being chased by something and were afraid they couldn't get away. They raced faster and faster, and always past Yurka.

He turned and went home.

1965-1966



Two fugitives

(Afterword)

"The Fugitive" is the most popular of Nikolai Dubov's books. For over twenty years now he has been writing books for children and young readers, but nearly all of his stories were first published in "adult" literary magazines. It is a sign of real talent, of course, when an author writing for children finds a wide adult readership. Among the stories acclaimed as Nikolai Dubov's best are his "On the Edge of the World", "Lights on the River", "Orphan", "A Stiff Trial", "A Sky the Size of a Lambskin", "A Tree Growing Apart", and "The Boy by the Sea".

Dubov is a serious, uncompromising and keen-sighted writer. He is compassionate, but his manner is terse and even severe. His view to life is manifested in the very strictness of his composition. There is a neat precision, a definite symmetry in his books. Unpredictable things happen too, but actually they only emphasise the logical course of events.

The story "A Tree Growing Apart" about the Great Patriotic War is like a pulsating body in which the war roads are the arteries and capillaries. The grim roads of the retreating army. The country roads along which plod the refugees, in groups or singly, pushing carts or carrying bundles containing all their worldly possessions. The ribbons of front-line roads, pitted by explosions. And, finally, a foreign road, swiftly running westward, a road with unfamiliar signs and guarded looks on the faces of the population. The story begins with roads and ends with roads. We see the "squelching swamp" through which the vehicles crawl laboriously, roaring and groaning and getting stuck all the time; the wide highway, along which trudged the war prisoners; the road to the town of K. along which the hero of the story rides in a German car to the hospital there—a daring journey that saves his life. And off the main roads plod the refugees, driven from home by the war....

In "The Boy by the Sea" there is a picture of carefree childhood joyously discovering the world; the story is also full of movement, and the roads link provincial life with the great world. Young Sashuk, who had cried his heart out because his mother would not let him take his pup on the voyage, draws us into this movement at once. He is going to Izmail with his parents, and kids from all the way down the street pour out of doors to see him off. "They start waving long before. Sashuk also waves to them. A small wave. So they'll know. They're staying, and he is leaving." At the end of the story it is he who has to see others off. "The boats push off. Sashuk stands on the edge of the pier and watches them go. An arm is raised in one of the boats, and Zhorka's voice reaches him already from far away: 'Buck up, bosun!' Sashuk does not stir or call back, and only gazes at the receding boats." It is hard staying behind alone. But Sashuk is trying to "buck up". "Huddling beside the empty packing cases, he falls asleep." On this the story ends.

Take "The Fugitive". Yurka, the main character, also lives in a house that stands just off the road. It is the road that brings news here—good or bad. And also the people who are to overturn Yurka's life. When he runs away from home, his wanderings bring him to the highroad, to the lorries queued up at the ferry, and then on to town. How many bitter moments in Yurka's life were witnessed by the road! How often he had tramped it. And still, he says: "They were luckiest when there was a big snowfall and the road was buried under. For one thing, they didn't have to go to school, and for another—all the drivers and people whose cars got stuck in the snow would crowd into their house. ...What a lot of different people you saw then, and what a lot of thrilling stories and experiences you heard from them!"

"It was really good to live right off the road. They were right, those newcomers were—their house did stand in a good spot."

This story also begins with the road. "Early in the morning Senka-Angel brought the water." It is Yurka who tells the story, and after the opening sentence he goes on to explain that on his way to the poultry-yard Senka-Angel always stopped at their place to provide them with fresh water for the day. There was the usual noisy bustle and the tractor rumbling because it had no storage battery, and every morning the driver had to get it going from a truck.

In the midst of this bustle a blue Volga car arrived by the same road. Yurka was the first to see the newcomer. This man would drown in the sea later although he was a good swimmer. Yurka, who had become attached to him, watched him diving into the towering waves with envious admiration. And when Vitaly Sergeyevich did not come up, when wave

after wave had crashed on the beach, Yurka still watched for him to bob up until Yulivanna's piercing scream stabbed his eardrums. Yulia Ivanovna, or Yulivanna as the children called her, had come there as Vitaly Sergeyevich's wife, but after the accident it became known that she was only his "lady friend"—a revelation which provided Yurka's parents and all the other with a lot of unhealthy excitement. Clutching her head in her hands she stood staring with wide-open eyes at the spot "where he ought to be and where he was not."

On the following day along the same road came another Volga car, a taxi this time. The driver who brought the wife and son of Vitaly Sergeyevich was in a foul temper because of the bad road, cursing it and calling it a track fit for mule carts, not decent cars.

The same road brought the fugitive back home eventually. The boy's heart was wrung with pity for his father who had suddenly gone blind, for his mother who'd have to shoulder everything alone now, and for "the kids", and he could not leave the family. Senka-Angel went on his way without Yurka. And through the image of the road, as many times before in the story, Yurka's state of mind is conveyed to us: "The lorry started with a roar and was off. A tip-up lorry came bouncing and rattling down the road, it overtook Senka's, then another one flew past, and then more and more of them. The cars raced along, angrily hooting their horns, urging one another on, and there was no telling if they were chasing something and could not catch up, or if they were being chased by something and were afraid they couldn't get away. They raced faster and faster, and always past Yurka."

Where is a person's home, where does he feel really at home? And why does he leave his home and take to the road which, in this case, is not simply a way made for travelling but a way to escape, to put himself out of reach, to change his life? What is it—cowardice, a moment of weakness?

The theme of escape has two renderings in this story.

Yurka, small, weak and dependent, runs away from home because he has been shocked into awareness of the pettiness, cowardly selfishness and cruelty of the world he has been living in. His decision to leave home for good is impulsive, it is a gesture of despair. But then the impulse develops into determination, and now he knows what he is doing. He remembers Vitaly Sergeyevich telling him how as a boy he also ran away from home once.

Vitaly Sergeyevich is the other fugitive. He is an architect, and once he had ideas which he experimented with, attempted to embody and work on. But his projects were corrected and ruined. He yielded ground and did not

protest. And as a result he produced freaks. He could not endure it and escaped from practice into theory. At the university chair he met Yulia Ivanovna. He found love, support and understanding, but he did not find any disciples among his pupils or establish his own architectural school. His coming to this lonely spot was also an escape—from his family, from the pressure of problems. It was a breathing spell, a brief moment of happiness. Vitaly Sergeyevich knew perfectly well that running away from a crisis was not solving it. With Yulia Ivanovna's moral support he was now almost ready to go back and face it. The storm, which was to kill him, at first had a rousing effect on him: he felt an upsurge of moral courage and no longer wanted to hide his head in the sand like an ostrich. Nikolai Dubov, however, denies him the chance to make a comeback. His drowning is a fatality which the author employs to enhance the feeling that the course of life is inevitably reiterative. Vitaly Sergeyevich drowns, and another person, a mere boy, takes his place, or rather finds himself in a similar situation. Yurka breaks with his parents and home. ("Something had broken off inside him or twisted, so that it could not be stuck back on or turned into place, and suddenly he felt years older.") He comes back when the decision to leave home for good has fully ripened in his mind, he stays because the plight of the family will not let him carry his decision through. ("As he walked to the road his every step was such an effort to make, one might think he had been walking for days without a halt or was wearing the leaden boots of that diver at the ferry.") As he grows up, he will gain the strength enabling him to leave the world he must live in more than once but always to come back, forever cherishing the memory of that other fugitive, the man who was drowned.

Nikolai Dubov's writing as a whole allows us to draw this conclusion. It is not the whim of chance, not a devastating storm, but a person's faith that saves him in all the vicissitudes of life, the author seems to assert in his books.

It is spiritual not physical loneliness that dooms a person. Even in the wilderness his inner world need not sink in lassitude but may actually become all the richer if he is inspired by invisible incentives. In the wilderness I am worth that which I believe in. As Antoine de Saint-Exupery said, "*L'essentiel est que demeure quelque part ce dont on a vécu.... L'essentiel est de vivre pour le retour....*"

I. Loginov

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